THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

JUNE, 1959

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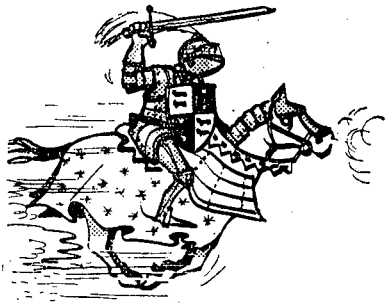

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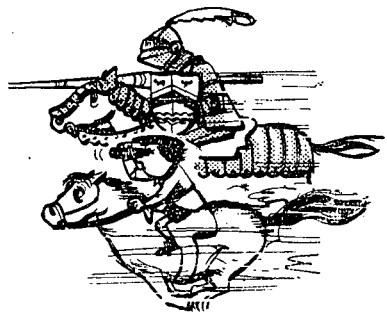
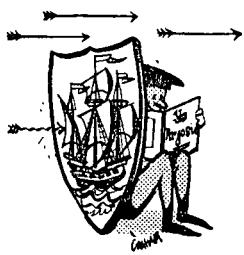


A knight in the
chivalrous age
Ran the gauntlet and
threw down
the gage
But *you* can sit still—
For adventure and thrill
Joust tourney an Argosy page



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ARGOSY

A Fleetway magazine

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Printed in England by PERCY BROTHERS, LTD., THE HOTSPUR PRESS, MANCHESTER 1, and published on the 10th of each month by THE AMALGAMATED PRESS, LTD., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for Transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription Rates: Inland, £1 19s. for 12 months, 19s. 6d. for 6 months. Overseas (except Canada), £1 17s. for 12 months, 18s. 6d. for 6 months. Canada, £1 14s. 6d. for 12 months, 17s. 3d. for 6 months. Sole Agents: Australasia, Messrs. GORDON & GOTCH, LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY, LTD.; Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Messrs. KINGSTONS, LTD.

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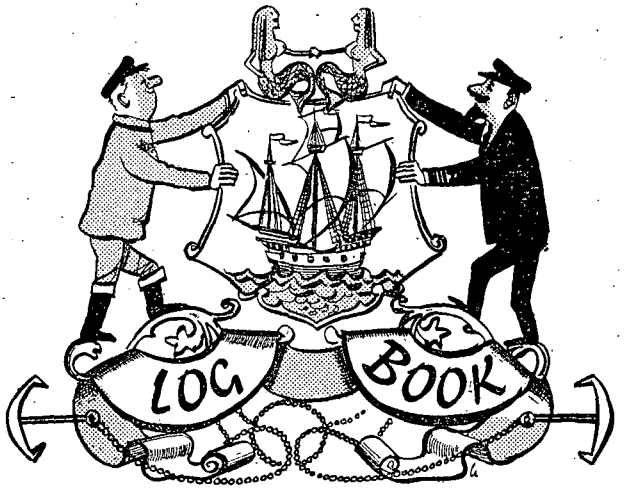

IN the days of chargers and chivalry, when no gent was worth the name without a few battleaxe dints on his cranium, a coat of arms wasn't just a pretty adjunct; it was a necessity. It took, in fact, the place of a car registration number today. You saw a caitiff knight exceeding the speed limit by belabouring his Percheron through your purlieus at seven miles an hour. Owing to the fashion for visors, which made everyone resemble the rear view of a coalscuttle, you could not hope to recognise anyone, even your own father, by his face. So you took a note of the quarterings on his shield, hurried home, looked him up in the Guide to County Families, and issued the proper challenge.

We can't help wondering, though, if the system didn't present some problems. For instance, what happened in those mêlées the Normans were so addicted to—how did you tell friend from foe without an encyclopædic memory? Did your squire pant along beside you with a notebook, shouting instructions:

"Dragon, gorged with the Collar of the Lord Chief Justice—that's Abbot; Three hedgehogs (or porcupines)—Abrahall; Ar., an eagle displ. with two heads gu. Marry come up, Sir Doublebois, you may smite that knight—'tis one of theirs."

But Sir Doublebois disagrees. "Ar, Roland you fool, it's an eagle displ. sa. charged on the body with two chevronels or, beaked and legged gu., holding in the beak a lily, slipped ppr. Why can't you be more exact? He's one of ours."

"Sorry," says Roland, "but here's one I do know—gu. and or, two squirrels in chief, sejant, cracking nuts."

With a noise like a dustbin rolling down three flights of

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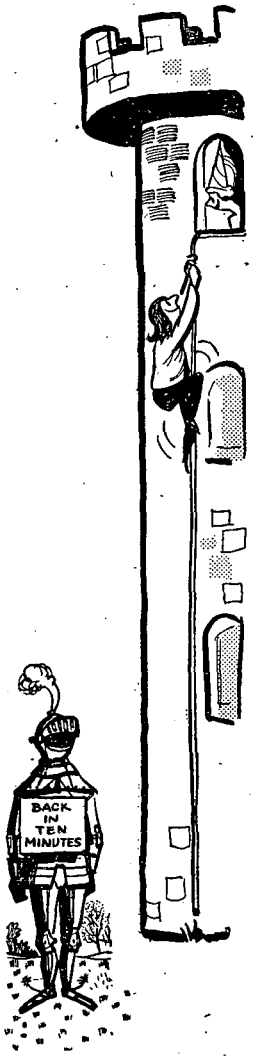
concrete steps, Sir Doublebois puts paid to the squirrels.

"Sir Doublebois!" shouts Roland, "I made a mistake! Those squirrels aren't in chief, sejant, they're respecting each other!"

Too late.



After this contretemps, Doublebois makes his squire carry field-glasses, and thus he is able to give notice of the approach of a sinister hand issuing out of a cloud fessways, and of three cherubim's heads, ppr. When, by the way, are cherubim's heads not proper?

Sir Doublebois deals with these opponents, but falls foul of a black knight, wearing the device of a fetterlock and shacklebolt, azure on a sable field. If Squire Roland had read Scott he would have been able to warn his master, but alas, he is not aware that this is one of the disguises of Richard Cœur de Lion, and his master is decapitated by one swipe from the mighty monarch's sword-arm.

We suspect that car registration plates are a less lethal form of amusement.

Interested readers, however, may care to know that so far as our researches reveal, the Argosy device is a ship in full sail in the sea proper; Crest: two anchors in saltire, three mullets, two mermaids, marinated—and a partridge in a pear tree.

Among this month's authors: **Philip Wylie**, well known on both sides of the Atlantic, was born in Massachussetts, of a family in which almost every member engaged in some form of writing. He studied medicine at Princeton, but gave it up after three years in favour of a varied career of jobs

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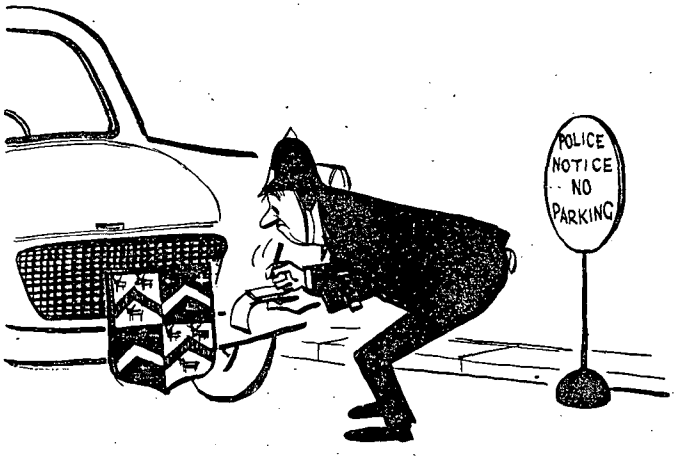
including publishing, journalism (on the *New Yorker*,) and spells on farms and factories, in shops and ships. He now lives in Florida, and amuses himself by playing the piano-accordion, fishing, carpentering, with a little golf, and abstract mathematics for light relief. In between he writes (very fast; he once wrote 100,000 words while crossing the Atlantic.)

George Bradshaw alleges that in spite of service in the American Air Force and a job with Sam Goldwyn, he has really never done anything but write short stories—scores of them.

D. P. Bramley, winner of the recent Seafarers' Education Service Short Story competition with his story *Executioner* (see page 105) is a North Yorkshireman, aged twenty-two. To satisfy an urge to travel he joined the Merchant Navy when he was seventeen, and is now a Radio Officer. His leisure is passed in reading, writing, swimming, and eating thick, juicy steaks.

James Thurber is quite a different shape from the plump, bald, downtrodden men in his cartoons—being tall, thin, and with a fine crop of hair. He is, however, shy, and somewhat absent-minded: sometimes, at a party or a meal, his wife says to him accusingly, "Thurber, you're writing!" and he gives a guilty start. His casual-seeming humour, which always manages to put its finger just on the spot where the human mind slips off into lunacy, is actually the fruit of much careful re-writing: he may take two years on a short book. Just the same, things happen to Thurber that couldn't happen to anyone else.

JOHN SILVER



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THE WOMAN OF HIS HEART

Queer rumours fly fast

BY LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

IT is a strange story I have to tell, and if you do not like such, this would be as good a place as any to stop. For who knows but that you might get interested in Moira Duffy, sitting there bare-legged by the sea, a corner of her petticoat showing under the homespun, and her heart breaking as the slow tide came in?

"Better," she said, "he should have followed the sea, and himself only coming home to me once at the year's end!"

With that she sprang up and ran to where the gate opened on a broad, white ribbon of road. Beyond, field after field fled upwards, brown, green, golden; and some silvered with the coming harvest when the sickles would be sharpened and the standing grain brought down.

"It is there he goes," she said, "and who knows upon what his eyes have looked?"

She listened as if for answer, but there came to her only the slight sound of the sea, and the slow creaking of cartwheels on the road.

Yet when she looked this way and that, there was no cart upon the road, and less sign of the lover for whom suddenly—her thin, virginal body bent above the gate—she wept. For had not word passed from lip to lip that the man with the oxcart had gone and was no more to be seen anywhere?

"Would he had never come," cried Moira, "to have bewitched the heart of Sean O'Connor and taken him from me!"

Many had met this stranger who afterwards could remember only the magic of his voice and the uneasiness of their own hearts.

At the village public house there were those who pronounced him more heady than what they drained out of pots; and fishermen to whom he had spoken on the shore cursed his coming, declaring that they fouled their nets, and took no fish, and that the oars grew heavy in their hands. That is as it may be, for queer rumours fly fast.

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But, long as this story is told, it will be recounted how Gran O'Mara had words with him on the open highway, and Sean O'Connor behind a hedge where the trout stream runs under the red bridge and so to the sea.

"And who are you?" Gran wished to know, looking him up and down.

The cart he drove was a flat haycart, and it contained nothing but himself, sitting straddle-legged on a box with a cushion of straw for his bony rump. His boots looked twice too big for his shrunken feet; his trousers were tied with wisps of straw above the ankles; his squat torso was covered with something that might be a smock or a loose blouse, so tattered that the threads of it streamed in any wind; and the hat he removed in deference to her was shapeless with use and weather.

"I am a carrier," he said.

"And what do you carry that you go on the highway with a cart empty under you no less?" cried Gran, who was nobody's fool.

The old man showed broken and yellowed teeth.

"Something that can travel faster than the wind and haunt a man all the days of his life. Ask at any public house if I do not sow the whirlwind. For such thoughts as mine men pay in food and drink and maybe a lodging for the night, which is better even than a hedge when it is flowering. Once I travelled in pots and pans, but that was before wisdom came to me." At this he began boisterously to laugh.

"Ah, ah," he cried, "the things I have seen in my youth and the thoughts I have had while the years flew by above me. For it is young men who see visions and old men who dream dreams, which is something I heard a long while since, and how shall I say where I heard it or in what book it is set down, who have no education in the printed word?"

"May you be forgiven such madness," cried Gran sharply, "and you so near your latter end."

"Would you deny an old man his humours?" he asked, and pulled his forelock, goading his oxen forward with a long stick he had cut from a wayside bush.

Gran O'Mara looked back only once, and that after a long while, but by then the road was empty as a picked bone.

As for Sean O'Connor, who was the lover of Moira Duffy and they to be married before long as all men knew, he came upon the carrier while the dew was still on the hedge and on the grass underfoot, there by the trout stream that runs under the red bridge and so to the sea.

"I am told," said the old man, "that you are handy in the

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making of verses and the like. Come now, answer me this; whom should a poet love?"

"The woman of his heart," said Sean stoutly.

"And have you met her?"

"I have that."

"I wonder," said the old man, lighting his pipe and drawing heavily for a time. "Tell me, lad, does she run before you like the wind, so that you can scarce put fingers on her? Is her form such that no two speak alike of her, save of a beauty past the telling? Are her breasts like hills in the morning mists, her eyes pools in which a man might well drown, her hair like grass under the summer wind, and do her lips cry destruction to him who would touch them?"

Sean had half risen, for there was a power of magic here.

"Who is this woman?" he cried.

"Ah," said the carrier, sucking in his cheeks and letting them out again, "she is to be found now here, now there, but a man will best find her close to the place that gave him birth."

With that he stood up and took Sean by the arms. "What is it you look on now?" he asked.

"A road."

"And else?"

"Fields, and a slope, and far trees by the ridge."

"Beyond that again?"

"Hills with the mists on them."

"It is there, if at all, that you will find her," said the old man.

"And how shall I be knowing her?"

"By that which brings a dog to his home, a bird to its nesting place. But I can see that all this is beyond your courage."

"No," cried Sean. "No."

The old man shrugged.

"If you go seeking her," he said, "despise nothing that you hear, for out of a bush may come fire and a voice, and in the hush of an evening she may speak and you thinking it but a thrush in the hedge."

Sean sighed deeply. "Has no man possessed her?"

"As to possessing her," said the old man, "to possess her fully would be to lose her. And with that we will make an end of riddles, for my head is tired with much thinking and my heart has a mortal ache to it, and if you have so much as a small coin handy it will not come amiss."

The dew had dried on the hedge and on the grasses underfoot before Sean O'Connor moved. When he came to the Duffy gate he would have passed by but for Moira herself calling to him;

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and at sight of him she knew, by that which a woman has within herself, that she had lost her power over him.

From this same gate, looking this way and that, she now saw a figure appear on the empty road, but seeing it was Gran O'Mara she ran and hid, not wanting anyone's pity; for in Gran's face were the things she had been thinking, herself just having passed the Post Office and the little shop with the pebbled windows where she had often bought sweetmeats for the both of them when they were more children than now, Moira's fist held in Gran's.

"The blessing of God on this place," said Gran, opening the gate and going on into the house, "and I give you good day."

It was dark within, after the blaze of sunlight on the road, but she could see that Duffy himself was home, and Moira's mother, and the man named James who lodged with them.

"How can it be a good day," cried Duffy, aggrieved, "and our girl with a wasting sickness come upon her? At that," he said, knocking the dottle from his pipe, "I'd as soon have a nitwit as a poet for a son-in-law. Let him go, I say."

"And where would he be going to offend your sweet temper?" said Gran, helping herself to a seat by the fire.

"Keep your tongue off my temper," said Duffy, "which is not worse than some not a mile off the end of my pipe. As for your question, do I have to tell you, and him going by night to see a woman who, God help us, doesn't exist, and her a creature of ill reputation at that?"

The mother of Moira spoke gently. "A spell has been put upon the poor lad, so it has."

"Better it were a whip!" cried Duffy, for at that moment Moira herself coming in, went past them without a sign, and up the stairs.

Gulls cried beyond the open door and the rush of the tide grew, and Gran O'Mara crossed herself, fancying she heard the sound of a cart on the road . . .

And there came to her the remembrance of the sea moaning outside a house in which she was a child, and of how once, in a great silence, a step came and went, no man giving the reason for it, and that night no young woman would go home alone. And when the sun was up a body swayed from the branch of a tree, and himself dead a long while before; there being some who swore there was no rope nor other substance to be seen, but between the black head of him and the branch itself a stick could be passed and meet nothing, which could not be so; but that was how it was in the telling.

She shivered a little, drawing closer to the fire, and started

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when the lodger, James, rose and his heavy step was heard going upstairs to his room. There was scant furniture there: a bed like a bunk, a table with a candlestick of his own making, and a great, black book, a shelf to hold other books with names to puzzle a scholar, a row of seasoned pipes, and the faded photograph of a woman whose name or story no man had ever heard him speak.

Moira sprang up at his coming, for she was in the room, staring out at the fields and the folded hills where the mists lay.

"Don't leave," he said, and put a hand on her shoulder.

"It is there he goes," she told him, "and who knows at all upon what his eyes have looked?"

At the gentleness of his hand on her shoulder and the look in his face she could have cried, but he shook his head to show that there are better things for a woman to do than give way to tears.

"Last night," he said, speaking more words at once than had ever been known since he came to lodge, "last night I followed Sean O'Connor. Where the gibbet stands above the rise of the glen I could see a long way under the moon, for the mist was behind me, and the sea far down a lake of glass that I was looking at when he came. Not seeing me, he stared a long time at the gibbet, and then went on a piece, and when I would have followed he was gone.

"I cried my loudest for fear of what might befall him, having had sight of his face, but neither man nor woman answered me, nor any beast cried out, and so I came back; and there were thorns had pierced my hands, and on the bushes the berries were red like blood." Then he shook his head, having frightened instead of comforted her which he had been minded to do, and he was heard to curse as he stumped out of the house into the flooding sunlight that fell that day on land and sea.

And Gran O'Mara sat listening again, fancying the slow sound of cartwheels on the roadway.

That was the night the fireflies showed themselves. Close to the sea there were none, but elsewhere in the moist dusk their myriad lamps were lit. It was said that so many had never been seen before, and much talk went about if this were a thing of good or evil omen.

Moira herself walked by the sea, and it was there, in a cleft of a rock, she found Sean O'Connor.

She came upon him so suddenly that neither he nor she was aware until their touch was upon each other.

"Sean!" she said, and put a hand out. "Oh, Sean—what has happened to us at all?"

When he didn't speak a wildness came on her, and she caught

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hold of him and would not let him go; but in a moment there was only stuff from his coat in her hands, and if it were not for that she would have said he had never been there at all, and she alone with the sea, and the birds crying faintly on the reef in the sharp stillness of the evening. She ran then, the shingle hurting her feet, the dust easing them, the wet grass of the fields cooling them—and there was Sean ahead.

He went as one in step to strange pipings, and now and again she lost him. Once he was seated on a stump, head in hands, as if to rest or to think, and at sight of the man's face her heart went out to him. But at sound of his name he was up and away, and when she ran he took a hedge that an acrobat might measure with respect and was gone.

So she returned slowly down the slope in the dusk, and came to a small wood, full of the mystery of young trees, and in the silver light the fireflies swung a thousand lanterns. She stretched out a hand and in the cupped palm a small lamp was lit.

She lifted her head suddenly.

"Were every one a lantern," she said, "I'd seek him with it until I brought him back."

Outside the cottage she could see her father and mother, and Gran O'Mara rocking in a great chair set in the twilight for her; and—looming large—the lodger, James, leaning on the gate. The sea was a slate beyond the rim of the night's tide. The road was white as if painted with one long brushstroke.

As she came near, Gran spoke. "What have you there?"

"A firefly in my hand."

As she released it, the pale lamp lit and faded and lit again above her.

"It is an omen," said Gran, and crossed herself. "When you are old this is a night you will be telling of. But whether of joy or of sorrow," said Gran, putting a hand for an instant across her eyes, "it is not given to me to know."

So long as this story is told, it will be related how it was to Gran O'Mara that Sean O'Connor came. He came beating with urgent knuckles upon the door of her cottage before she had shaken sleep from her. She saw the dawn creeping greyly over the sea as she opened the door, and there was the red hair of Sean like a passionate flame in her doorway. When she saw his face she looked a long time at it; then her thin hands reached out to take hold of a ragged coat from which part had been torn.

"Tell me, Sean," she said.

Sean spoke only after a moment and then in a voice that was hard for her to bear, loving the boy not less than she did Moira.

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" He said that to have her was to lose her, and so it is. Now I am wanting only Moira, that was to be my wife; but my love has returned too late, for flesh was given her for the night and a frame that a man's arms could hold in the darkness of a hedge."

" You must go to Moira," said Gran, after a moment.

" That I cannot."

" We will go together."

As they approached the Duffy cottage, stark and still against the grey sea, he was troubled. " She'll not be waking yet," he said.

There had been a storm somewhere at sea which only now began to fret against the shore. Cat's-paws broke the still surfaces of the inshore pools and far out the first white horses came rearing and plunging.

The door banged behind Moira Duffy as she came out, and flattened the skirts of both the women against their bodies.

" Speak to her, Sean," said Gran, her voice rising like the wind. " Take her to you, Sean! "

" No," he said. " I cannot. Shame is upon me, for I have been all night in the hills and have held in my arms a woman not mortal under the cold stars."

" Sean, listen to me. There is no such woman at all, but in your fancy and in the madness of a man on the edge of the grave."

" And she taking from my finger a ring that was my father's father's," said Sean, not looking up at all.

" And what," cried Moira, weeping for him, " would one not mortal be wanting at all with a keepsake? "

" God knows," said Sean O'Connor, and he turned from her.

But Gran O'Mara had a sharp, sure word to say. " There is a time for marrying and giving in marriage and, God willing, let it be this very day." So she went into the cottage before the two of them, saying, " The blessing of God be upon this place, and it's yourself, Mary Duffy, is about to be a mother-in-law."

Fergus Duffy spoke heavily from the staircase, " What nonsense is this and the sun not yet high? "

" If it's Sunday clothes you have to your name, Fergus Duffy," said Gran, " shake the moths out of them, for you'll be needing them. And who will be running for word with his Reverence? "

" I will," said the lodger, James.

" There must be food and drink for all," cried the mother of Moira, beginning to fluster and fuss, a light coming in her eyes; but Gran, feeling the weight of years, went to sit by the fire until the first of the friends began to gather. The word getting quickly about, they came from far and near, though it was the day of the great catch of fish on that coast, of which fishermen still speak, when so many were taken that their nets broke.

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Rain came up over the sea before the vows were made, and the windows rattled even after the fiddles began to scrape, though it was blowing clear again when Sean O'Connor led his bride of an hour and they stood to seaward alone.

"Look," said Moira, and took hold of his arm, "the rain is all over, Sean, and there is light on the waters."

But the heaviness was still upon him.

"No words spoken," he said, "can change things, but only perhaps your own love. It is true," said Sean, "I have given you a ring, and my love with it, but not that which was my father's father's."

"Sean, look."

He stared at her and at what she held out to him.

"Before God, Moira, and where would you be getting that ring?"

"From the hand that is holding mine and no other," said Moira, and averted her face for the moment, then looked deep into his eyes, "when there was darkness so you could not be seeing my face and no clearness in your mind at all, poor boy."

"So—it was you!"

"None other."

He held her until she cried out with the hurt of it; then he loosed her and she had to run after him to catch him where the new surf fretted the rocks.

"Sean!" she cried, in terror again, but he turned and caught her by the shoulders.

"Look in my eyes, Moira. Do you trust me still, beloved, and all that has happened like a tale that is told between us?"

The wind held her against him and she could not speak, but a great light had come into the face of Sean O'Connor. "Let me be alone awhile," he said. "Let me be alone with the sea and the gulls and the wind and this thing that has come to me. For there is no wonder in the far hills nor in the words of any man living like that which has come to me this day."

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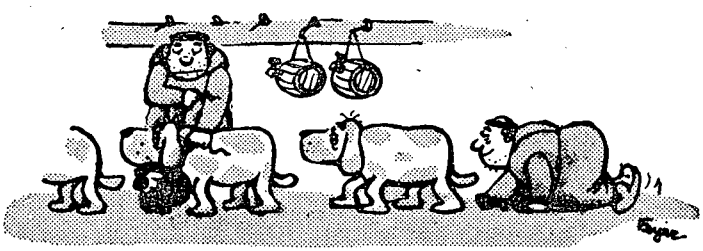

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LAUMOTO INCIDENT

He wasn't technically a beachcomber

BY BERKELY MATHER

"THE Laumoto earthquake? In 'fifty-one?" said Charters with some surprise. "You weren't there, were you, Doctor?"

"I was," said the doctor; and it was my turn to look surprised then. I also had been in that uncomfortable corner of the Pacific on that ghastly night, but I certainly hadn't seen him. I said as much, and the doctor grinned.

"I was in gaol," he said.

Of the five of us on the club verandah that night in Fiji, Charters, the fattest and usually the slowest, was the first to recover. He spluttered a little and smiled weakly. "Ahem—You mean you were attending a patient there, I take it?"

"Like hell I was," the doctor answered. "I was doing six weeks for vagrancy. Working on the breakwater. Very hard work."

"A joke, I suppose?" said the padre with some severity.

"If you call swinging a pick for eight hours in the sun a joke," said the doctor, "your idea of humour differs from mine."

"There must be some explanation," I put in—and meant it. Our doctor, though young for the post of Principal Medical Officer and, according to some of the craggier planters, rather too ruggedly good-looking, was a pillar of respectability.

He shrugged. "Of course there was an explanation. I was on the beach there. I'd skipped from a copra schooner because, although I didn't particularly mind sleeping with cockroaches, I didn't like eating them in the stew. Come to that, I didn't like the stew, either—not twice a day, seven days a week."

This was too much. I said, "Let's work it out on a time basis. We're talking about a night some seven years ago—no, eight now. You've been here to my knowledge for seven. It is usually supposed to take six years to qualify as a doctor. It just doesn't work out. Pull the other one."

"I was qualified," he said. "Not long, admittedly—"

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"Then how come you were in gaol for vagrancy?"

"I'd been struck off the register for professional malpractice," said the doctor evenly.

The padre was the first to recover this time, though the effect on him was akin to that of seeing the Vicar's warden playing stud poker during a vestry meeting.

"I don't think that's at all funny," he said.

"Once again," answered our medico imperturbably, "neither did I. But that's what the blighters did. Heaved me straight out on my pink ear. Just had my first lot of cards printed, too. M.B., B.Sc.—looked good. Never had a chance to use 'em."

"Am I to understand that you're practising under false pretences?" asked Charters ponderously.

"Oh no," the doctor assured him, "I'm back on it now. Long story. Want to hear it?"

We did.

"The war interrupted my medical training; I caught the last few months of the fighting and was slightly wounded at Arnhem. Soon after it was over I qualified, and found a job as assistant to a decent, if somewhat war-weary, old G.P. up in the north. There was some jiggery-pokery over prescriptions. Lashings of terrifically expensive drugs were being supplied under National Health—far more than a practice such as ours would use in ten years. The chemists in the town got suspicious. The authorities sent up an investigator. All the prescriptions had been made out either by my senior or myself. We were for it. We pleaded not guilty and both escaped without a sentence, but we got a thumping fine, and the General Medical Council did the rest—quite rightly. Off the register we came."

I think we were sorry at this point that we had asked for the story. This was sordid.

"Well," went on the doctor, "it just about broke the old boy up. Fortunately he had enough to live on, so he moved out of the district and settled down into retirement. I wasn't so happily placed. The fine had about busted me and I hadn't a bob in the world. Didn't feel like meeting my friends either, so I got a job as deckhand on a Panamanian tramp and skipped out to these parts.

"I drifted for a year before I realised that I would have to take a pull at myself and face up to things. The only other thing besides medicine that I'm remotely interested in is botany. Laumoto is rich in plant life, and the place fascinated me. I jumped the copra schooner there. My worldly wealth was represented by a handful of pesetas, a razor, a clean shirt, and a

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couple of notebooks. Living is easy there—bananas and coconuts drop into your mouth, and there is fish enough to feed London just for the trouble of chucking a line in off the reef.

"I settled down to a life of near-contentment, beachcombing and promising myself that soon I would begin my magnum opus—the first standard work on the plants of Laumoto. It could have been a paradisaical life, but unfortunately there are snags in most paradises. In this one it was—well, sounds odd when I was one myself, no doubt—beachcombers.

"The war had left a motley lot of flotsam on the Pacific beaches, deserters from three armies and as many navies, men on various wanted lists, convicts who had been released from the penal settlement in New Caledonia when it looked as if the Japs were going to overrun the place, all sorts of queer hawks.

"Technically I wasn't a beachcomber because, although I lived rough, I had a little money that I'd saved from my deckhand's pay, and I didn't scrounge round the settlement making a nuisance of myself. The Spanish Colonial police knew this, and they were generally pretty decent to me—until I saw that perfectly lovely girl going for a swim early one morning, at the lonely end of the lagoon beach.

"I can see her now—blonde hair blowing free in the offshore breeze, yellow swimsuit that set off her delicate tan, running like a fawn across the sands to the white breakers—and the God-awful, bewhiskered stiff who crept up when she had gone, and pinched her towel, clothes, and beach-bag. I chased the swab. He turned on me and pulled a knife. We were going at it hammer and tongs when the guardia civil arrived and ran us both in.

"I remember trying to avoid the girl's eye when she came up. The other chap's story was that we had both pinched the stuff, but that I was trying to make off with the lot. I kept quiet, because I realised that she was English, and I didn't want her to know that I was. So, although she refused to prefer a charge, we were both hooked in. The beak said he was fed up with beachcombers—and who could blame him? So, as I said, it was six weeks on the breakwater."

He was telling it lightly, almost flippantly, but there were no more interruptions from any of us. We were hanging on his words now.

"The night of the earthquake—you remember?—the first big shock came just after sundown. Half the settlement came down, and fires started. They let us prisoners out in case we were squashed to mincemeat, and—fair play to most of them—they buckled to on rescue work. The others got busy on the stock of the two hotels and half dozen cafés down on the waterfront.

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" There were two Spanish doctors there, one very, very good and one unbelievably bad—worse than bad, he was half tight. I attached myself to them as sort of orderly in the makeshift operating theatre they had established on the beach. I started helping to carry stretchers—then I found myself swabbing up, helping with dressings, even handling instruments for them.

" Then the porch of the church came down and buried a round score of poor shrieking devils who were sheltering under it.

" The good doctor went over with an emergency kit. He worked like the very devil and saved those who were savable before the next big shock, and then he was a casualty himself.

" That left the other chap and myself at the theatre. He sent me over to the church to see what I could do, and when I got back in the early hours of the morning the first mad rush was over. The last case was just coming in on a stretcher—and by the side of it walked the girl.

" It was her father. They had both been doing what they could for the injured when the old boy was trapped under some masonry, and they had dragged him out more dead than alive.

" My colleague looked at him and shrugged. He evidently knew them, because he spoke in English. ' The right leg—it must come off,' he said.

" I shall never forget the girl's face. It couldn't have hit her harder if she had been the one on the stretcher. She said quietly, ' You must do as you think best; but my father is a naturalist. He climbs cliffs—mountains. It will kill him.'

" ' It will kill him if I do not do that, senorita.'

" Now I was a very young doctor when the G.M.C. heaved me out, but I had seen some rough and ready surgery on the landings and at Arnhem, and a quick look at the patient told me that a technique they used in the casualty stations, and penicillin, and an immediate transfusion, would be better than an amputation. I said so—and the doctor took it badly.

" ' You are the orderly, no? ' he said. ' All right, my friend, because you have helped here you must not take the liberty. You keep your place and do the swabbing up—no? '

" The girl looked at me, and all the hope in the world was in her eyes. ' Have a shot at it, doctor,' I begged.

" ' I'll have a shot at sending you back to the prison in two minutes,' he said. ' Get the steriliser boiling.'

" The girl looked at me again, and I saw she recognised me as the hobo from the beach. She sighed and turned away, and the droop of her shoulders tore my guts. I hurried after her.

" ' Look,' I said, ' I was a doctor. I was chucked out; but the charge had nothing to do with my professional skill. They

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can't take that, such as it is, away from me. Say the word and I'll take over—and your father's leg stays where it is.'

" That gal could trust. I must have looked a sorry sight in my prison rig—bloodstained and dirty and four days past my last shave. She just nodded dumbly, and I took her off and gave her a job winding some bandages. Then I went back. The doctor was roaring for the steriliser. He stopped roaring and went out like a light as I smacked him under the kisser."

The padre clucked disapprovingly.

" He stayed out for half an hour—and by that time I had the old boy quite comfortable up the beach with the girl sitting beside him. He kept his leg and pulled through like a good 'un."

The doctor lit a cigarette.

" Oh no, you don't," I said. " There must be lots more to it than that. You're not going to leave the story half told."

" There was a bit more to it. The Spanish doctor got the Order of the Enlightened Aesculapius or something. He was good enough to mention the help I had given, in a neat little speech he made when the Governor pinned it on him. He was really quite a good chap, apart from his addiction to pinching the medical brandy. Even that failing turned out to be a blessing in disguise. He thought the clout I had given him was the roof of the dressing-station falling on him."

" More than that," Charters insisted. " Out with it."

" You're a glutton for details," said the doctor. " All right, if you're going to make a thing of it—yes, my gaol sentence was rubbed out. The gent I had been run in with came up and kissed me on both cheeks and smothered me with praise and garlic. He called on heaven to witness I was a hero of the first water and he was a dirty dog. He was a good chap, too."

" As a result, you were restored to the register? " I ventured.

" Not quite," grinned the doctor. " I got back because the covey of blackmarketing yeggs who had been forging prescriptions to obtain drugs were caught red-handed a year after I had been turfed out, so actually when all this happened I had been back on the roll six months—but I didn't know it."

" And the girl? " asked Charters, whose adiposity concealed a sentimental heart. " Did you ever hear of her again? "

" Certainly," said the doctor. " Here she is coming to drag me off home. Good night, you chaps." © Berkely Mather 1959

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SLICE OF LIFE

Surgeon: the person with real inside information.

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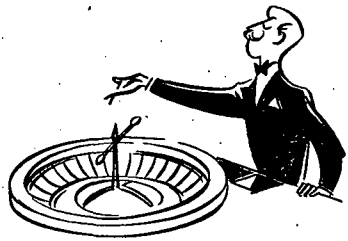

Wheel of Fortune

nobody loses all the time

e. e. cummings

Good Luck she is never a lady
But the cursedest quean alive!
Tricksey, wincing and jady,
Kittle to lead or drive.
Greet her—she's hailing a stranger!
Meet her—she's busking to leave.
Let her alone for a shrew to the bone,
And the hussy comes plucking your sleeve!
Largesse, largesse, Fortune!
I'll neither follow nor flee.
If I don't run after Fortune
Fortune must run after me!

RUDYARD KIPLING, *The Wishing-Caps*

En Plein

With a shrug of his shoulders, he set the limit on ' Zero.'

I held my breath . . . The ball ceased to rattle—began to fall—ricocheted from stud to stud—tumbled into the wheel—nosed ' 32 '—and . . . fell with a click into ' 0.'

Berry spread out his hands.

" I tell you," he said, " it's too easy. And now, again."

" Don't! " cried Daphne. " Don't! I beg you—"

" My darling," said Berry, " after to-night— No. Leave the stake, please—I'll never play again. This evening—well, the money's there, and we may as well have it, mayn't we? I mean, it isn't as if I hadn't been given the tip . . . Don't bother about the wheel—the lady's been hammering away. You must admit, she's done the job thoroughly. First the intuition: then the where-withal: then what to back. I should be a bottle-nosed mug if I didn't—"

" *Zero.*"

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Upon the explosion of excitement which greeted the astounding event, patrons of the Baccarat Table and of the other Roulette Wheel left their seats and came crowding open-mouthed to see what was toward . . .

Berry bowed his acknowledgments.

DORNFORD YATES, *Jonah and Co.*

Lucky Break

As I walk along the Bois Boo-long with an independent air,
You can hear the girls declare,
" He must be a Millionaire."
You can hear them sigh and wish to die,
You can see them wink the other eye
At the man who broke the Bank at Monte Carlo.

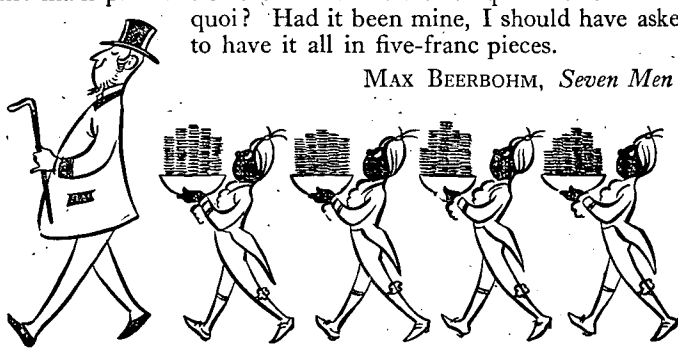
FRED GILBERT, *The Man who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*

Worth Noting

Everything about him, except the amount of money he had been winning, seemed moderate . . . Behind him was an attendant bearing a big wooden bowl—that plain but romantic bowl supplied by the establishment to a banker whose gains are too great to be pocketed . . . Pethel, with a wave of his hand towards the tables, said, " I suppose you never condescend to this sort of thing? "

I glanced down at the splendid mess of counters and gold and notes that were now becoming, under the swift fingers of the little man at the bureau, an orderly array . . . And indeed, I had never, I vow, felt flimsier than when the little man at the bureau, naming a fabulous sum, asked its owner whether he would take the main part in notes of mille francs? cinq mille? dix mille? quoi? Had it been mine, I should have asked to have it all in five-franc pieces.

MAX BEERBOHM, *Seven Men*



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Disc-Jokey

" Well, it's like the big wheel at Luna Park. Have you seen the big wheel? "

" No, I'm afraid not."

" You pay five francs and go into a room with tiers of seats all round, and in the centre the floor is made of a great disc of polished wood that revolves quickly. At first you sit down and watch the others. They are all trying to sit in the wheel, and they keep getting flung off, and that makes them laugh, and you laugh too. It's great fun."

" I don't think that sounds very much like life," said Paul rather sadly.

EVELYN WAUGH, *Decline and Fall*

Throw and Miss

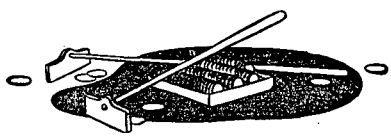
Miss, I have a very fine house
newly built with pine;
and you may have it at your command
if you will be my bride.

Sir, I know it's a very fine house,
also a very fine yard;
but who will stay at home with me
when you're out playing cards?

Miss, I have a very fine horse,
he paces like the tide;
and you may have him at your command
whenever you wish to ride.

Sir, I know he's a very fine horse.
also a very fine barn,
but his master drinks and gambles so,
I'm afraid his horse will learn.

The Gambling Suitor,
American Folksong



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FAKE DIXIE

It always enchants me after midnight

BY JAMES THURBER

"OLD sundials used to boast, in Latin, and I suppose a few in quiet gardens here and there still do, *Horas non numero nisi serenas*—I count serene hours only."

"Et pourquoi pas?" my wife asked vaguely.

It was our first night home after six months in Europe, and the hour was midnight at Tim's Place, and more melancholy than serene. We had just heard of the decline of several friends when the stranger with the empty highball glass and the Latin phrase hopped our table.

"My name is Warren Kirkfield," he said unconvincingly, holding out a damp right hand.

"I bet his real name is Chase or Psst," said the pretty young woman on my left. I didn't know who she was, or how she had got there.

The newcomer ignored this.

"Sit down," I said unwarmly. "Urge up a footstool, loosen your stays, saucer your Scotch."

"Don't be so cruel," said my wife, moving over so that Kirkfield could sit next to her, across the table from me and the fair unknown. "Maybe he has a right to be sad—it's a free country. Maybe you can't always be everything in it, but you can be that."

"No politics," said the young woman, with the faintest of hiccups.

"My name is Keith Maitland," I lied, "and this is my wife, the former Geraldine Spinney. The lady on my left is a nameless waif out of the night, a poor windlestraw on the stream of time."

"Ah thought you-all was Bing Crosby," said the windlestraw, in a fake Dixie that was not too bad for one in her cups. Fake Dixie always enchants me after midnight. I prayed God to keep my hand off her knee.

Suddenly we all had a fresh drink.

"How are you, Bing?" asked Kirkfield, clinking his glass against mine.

"Non sum qualis eram sub regno bony Sinatra," I said

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quickly, having waited for years to wedge that line in somewhere.

"You finally made it," my wife said, for she knows all my lines, wedged and unwedged.

"You're just a goddam kissing bug," the windlestraw told Kirkfield. "I saw you." She turned to me. "I can't leave him alone a minute but what he's bending some girl over backwards. This one had glasses and too much teeth."

"I was being a gentleman," protested Kirkfield. "The lady had something in her eye."

"What was it?" asked Mrs. Kirkfield, for it was unquestionably she. "A roguish twinkle?"

"I came here to tell these charming people a sad story, not to refight the war between the sexes," Kirkfield said.

"Not that story again," said his wife.

I had lost interest in her knee. "Go ahead, Maitland," I said.

"Just call me plain Keith," he murmured.

"The people at the next table must think they are losing their minds," my wife put in.

"Or ours," Mrs. Kirkfield amended.

"Well, then," Kirkfield began, "I was on the edge of a nervous crack-up last summer, for the usual variety of reasons—fear of death, fear of life, fear of the inhuman being. Also, I had just become forty-one, and realised that I only had nineteen years to live before I would begin to cackle."

"I won't be there," said his wife's voice from inside her highball glass. "He'll be bald as a beagle and his back will hurt and he'll babble about his conquex."

"Quests," my wife corrected her.

"You can say that again," said Mrs. Kirkfield.

"There was only one person I wanted to see, wanted to talk to," Kirkfield went on. "The greatest symbol of security in my life, the man who could pull me back from the doors of Hell, my old philosophy professor, Dr. Pensinger. I had not seen him for five years, but for nearly twenty we had exchanged postcards at Christmas and, because it amused him—you know how professors are—on Nietzsche's birthday."

"I've got to have more whisky to get through this again," said his wife, and we got more whisky.

"Everybody, in college and afterwards, turned to Dr. Pensinger for inspiration and consolation," her husband went on. "He had, and still has, some piece of unique philosophy for each special case. 'You can keep a stiff upper lip, and smile, too,' and 'Don't let that chip on your shoulder be your only reason for walking erect.' We always left Dr. Pensinger's study with a high heart and renewed hope."

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"I just won't be there, that's all," his wife cut in. "Let him stomp his cane and yell his head off, for all I care. Give me a man like Gary Cooper or Harpo Marx, who doesn't talk all the time."

I touched her glass with mine, and said, "Here's something in your eye, I hope."

"Much he'd care if you did," she said.

"Well, last summer, when I got the galloping jumps, I decided to call on Dr. Pensinger and see if he could pull me out of it," Kirkfield said. "He lives in a charming house in Riverdale, and I drove up there one Sunday afternoon. His wife opened the door, and said, 'We don't need anything today.'

"Before she could shut the door, I told her who I was and why I was there, and she said Dr. Pensinger was in his study and I could just go on in, and so I did. It was a terrifying visit. He had not changed a bit. He did not even seem a day older than the last time I had met him and listened to his cheering words. The same thoughtful, blue eyes, the same reassuring smile, the same gentle voice." Kirkfield took a great gulp of his highball.

"Then what was terrifying about the visit?" I asked.

Kirkfield lit a cigarette. "He was wearing two hats," he said.

There was a long pause.

"In his study?" I asked.

"*Two* hats?" my wife asked, putting her realistic finger on the more incongruous fact.

"Two hats," Kirkfield repeated. "They were both grey felt hats, one on top of the other. The terrifying thing was that he didn't say anything about them. He just sat there with two hats on, trying to cheer me up."

"I always say you can have too much philosophy," Mrs. Kirkfield said. "It isn't good for you. It's disorganising. Everybody's got to wake up some time feeling that everything is terrible, because it is."

"Couldn't you have said, 'Pardon me, but you seem to be wearing two hats?'" my wife wanted to know.

"No, I couldn't," said Kirkfield. "I don't even remember how I got out of there. I had the chattering jitters. His wife showed me to the door, and said, 'Did he buy anything? If he did, I'll simply send it back when it arrives.'"

I thought it was time for another drink. We had all finished our last one very quickly.

"We never know what's going to happen to us," my wife said.

"I don't care if my husband wears *three* hats," his wife said. "I won't be there."

I had a sudden frightening vision of walking about the city in a

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few years, wearing only one shoe. Even my best friends, I realised, wouldn't mention it. I thought it was time to go home now, and stood up. My wife and I left the Kirkfields sitting there with four drinks, since we had not touched our new ones.

Tim helped me on with my overcoat, and handed me my hat, and we started to the door. One of the waiters came running after me, and handed me a hat. " You left this the last time you were here," he said. " You went away without a hat that night."

" Don't you dare! " my wife said, but I put the hat he gave me on top of the one I was wearing, and we went out into the street, and I whistled for a taxi.

Pretty soon, one drove up and stopped, but when the driver saw that I was wearing two hats, he said, " Not in this cab, Jack."

He was about to drive off when my wife opened the door and got in. " I'll see you at the Algonquin," she said, " if you get that far."

I stood there for a long while, and it began to rain. I walked back to the hotel in the rain. © 1958 The New Yorker Magazine Inc.

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GOLD AND SILVER

Five, says the rhyme, for silver, six for gold, and seven for a secret that's never been told. But our seven secrets have been told as often as the knell of parting day, so on your metal, get set, go! If you don't shine, try page 143.

1. *Your wife says it's your silver wedding anniversary. How many years since you put that golden ring on her finger? And how long till your golden wedding?*
2. *Over what amount is silver not legal tender?*
3. *Gold and silver often appear on escutcheons. What are their correct heraldic terms?*
4. *Distinguish between, a. Golden-rod; b. Gold Stick; c. Silver Stick; (none of them are fireworks); and can you locate, d. Golden Lake; e. Golden Ridge; f. Silverbell?*
5. *Who wrote: a. The Silver Box;*
   b. The Golden Bowl;
   c. The Silver Tassie?
6. *Golden sovereigns, dated* 1958, *were struck last year at the Royal Mint. True or false?*
7. *Who wrote the Gold and Silver Waltz?*

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SUNSET HARP

The men bent half down in wonder—
it was better than finding ambergris

BY RAY BRADBURY

TOM, knee-deep in the waves, a piece of driftwood in his hand, listened.

The house, up towards the coast highway in the late afternoon, was silent. The sounds of cupboards being rummaged, suitcase locks snapping, vases being smashed, and of a final door crashing shut, all had faded away.

Chico, standing on the pale sand, flourished his wire-strainer to shake out a harvest of lost coins. After a moment, without glancing at Tom, he said, " Let her go."

So it was every year. For a week or a month their house would have music swelling from the windows, there would be new pots of geraniums on the porch-rail, new paint on the doors and steps. The clothes on the wire line changed from harlequin pants to sheath-dresses to handmade Mexican frocks like white waves breaking behind the house.

Inside, the paintings on the walls shifted from imitation Matisse to pseudo-Italian Renaissance.

Sometimes, looking up, he would see a woman drying her hair like a bright yellow flag on the wind. Sometimes the flag was black or red. Sometimes the woman was tall, sometimes short, against the sky. But there was never more than one woman at a time.

And, at last, a day like today came . . .

Tom placed his driftwood on the growing pile near where Chico sifted the billion footprints left by people long vanished from their holidays.

" Chico. What are we doing here? "

" Living the life of Reilly, boy! "

" I don't feel like Reilly, Chico."

" Work at it, boy."

Tom saw the house a month from now, the flowerpots blowing dust, the walls hung with empty squares, only sand carpeting the floors. The rooms would echo like shells in the wind. And all night, every night, bedded in separate rooms, he and Chico

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would hear a tide falling away and away down a long shore, leaving no trace.

Tom nodded imperceptibly.

Once a year he himself brought a nice girl here, knowing she was right at last and that in no time they would be married. But his women always stole silently away before dawn, feeling they had been mistaken for someone else, not being able to play the part.

Chico's friends left like vacuum-cleaners, with a terrific drag, roar, rush, taking their purses with them, like toy dogs which Chico had petted as he opened their jaws to count their teeth.

"That's four women so far this year."

"O.K., referee." Chico grinned.

"Chico—" Tom bit his lower lip, then went on, "I been thinking. Why don't we split up?"

Chico just looked at him.

"I mean," said Tom quickly, "maybe we'd have better luck alone."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Chico slowly, gripping the strainer in his big fists before him. "Look here, boy, don't you know the facts? You and me, we'll be here come the year 2000. A couple of crazy, dumb, old gooney-birds drying their bones in the sun. Nothing's ever going to happen to us now, Tom; it's too late. Get that into your head and shut up."

Tom swallowed and looked steadily at the other man. "I'm thinking of leaving—next week."

"Shut up, shut up, and get to work!"

Chico gave the sand an angry, showering rake that tilled him forty-three cents in dimes and nickels.

He stared blindly at the coins shimmering down the wires like a pin-table game all afire.

Tom did not move, holding his breath.

They both seemed to be waiting for something.

The something happened.

"Hey . . . hey . . . hey . . ." From a long way off down the coast a voice called.

The two men turned slowly.

"Hey . . . hey. Oh, hey . . ."

A boy was running, yelling, waving along the shore two hundred yards away. There was something in his voice that made Tom feel suddenly cold. He held on to his own arms, waiting.

"Hey!"

The boy pulled up, gasping, pointing back along the shore.

"A woman, a funny-woman, by the North Rock."

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"A woman!" The words exploded from Chico's mouth, and he began to laugh. "Oh no, no."

"What d'you mean, a funny woman?" asked Tom.

"I don't know," cried the boy, his eyes wide. "You've got to come and see. Awful funny."

"You mean drowned?"

"Maybe. She came out of the water, she's lying on the shore, you've got to see, yourself . . . funny . . ." The boy's voice died. He gazed off north again. "She's got a fish's tail."

Chico laughed. "Not before supper, please."

"Please," cried the boy, dancing now. "No lie. Oh, hurry!"

He ran off, sensed he was not followed, and looked back in dismay.

Tom felt his lips move. "Boy wouldn't run this far for a joke, would he, Chico?"

"People have run farther for less."

Tom started walking. "All right, son."

"Thanks, mister, oh thanks!"

The boy ran. Twenty yards up the coast, Tom looked back. Behind him, Chico squinted, shrugged, dusted his hands wearily, and followed.

They moved north along the twilight beach, their skin weathered in tiny, lizard folds about their burnt, pale-water eyes, looking younger because their hair was cut close to the skull so you could not see the grey. There was a fair wind, and the ocean rose and fell with prolonged concussions.

"What," said Tom, "what if we get to North Rock and it's true? The ocean has washed some *thing* up?"

But before Chico could answer Tom was gone, his mind racing down coasts littered with horseshoe crabs, sand-dollars, starfish, kelp, and stone. From all the times he'd talked of what lives in the sea, the names returned with the breathing fall of waves.

Argonauts, they whispered, codlings, pollacks, tautoga, tench, sea-elephant, they whispered, gillings, flounders, and beluga, the white whale, and grampus, the sea-dog . . . always you thought how these must look from their deep-sounding names.

Perhaps you would never in your life see them rise from the salt meadows beyond the safe limits of the shore, but they were there, and their names, with a thousand others, made pictures. And you looked and wished you were a frigate-bird that might fly nine thousand miles to return some year with the full size of the ocean in your head.

"Oh, quick—" the boy had run back to peer in Tom's face— "it might be gone!"

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" Keep your shirt on, boy," said Chico.

They came round the North Rock. A second boy stood there, looking down.

Perhaps from the corner of his eye, Tom saw something on the sand that made him hesitate to look straight at it, but fix instead on the face of the boy standing there. The boy was pale, and he seemed not to breathe.

On occasion he remembered to take a breath, his eyes focused, but the more they saw there on the sand, the more they took time off from focusing and turned blank and looked stunned. When the ocean came in over his tennis shoes, he did not move or notice.

Tom glanced away from the boy to the sand.

And Tom's face, in the next moment, became the face of the boy. His hands assumed the same curl at his sides; and his mouth moved to open and stay half open; and his eyes, which were light in colour, seemed to bleach still more with so much looking.

The setting sun was ten minutes above the sea.

" A big wave came in and went out," said the first boy, " and here she was."

They looked at the woman lying there.

Her hair was very long, and it lay on the beach like the threads of an immense harp. The water stroked along the threads and floated them up and let them down, each time in a different fan and silhouette. The hair must have been five or six feet long, and now it was strewn on the hard, wet sand, and it was the colour of limes.

Her face . . .

The men bent half down in wonder.

Her face was white sand sculpture, with a few water drops shimmering on it like summer rain upon a cream-coloured rose. Her face was that moon which when seen by day is pale and unbelievable in the blue sky. It was milk-marble veined with faint violet in the temples.

The eyelids closed down upon the eyes were powdered with a faint water-colour, as if the eyes beneath gazed through the fragile tissue of the lids and saw them standing there above her, looking down and looking down. The mouth was a pale, flushed sea-rose, full and closed upon itself.

And her neck was slender and white; and her breasts were small and white, now covered, uncovered, covered, uncovered in the flow of water, the ebb of water, the flow, the ebb, the flow. And the breasts were flushed at their tips, and her body was

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startlingly white, almost an illumination, a white-green lightning against the sand. And as the water shifted her, her skin glinted like the surface of a pearl.

The lower half of her body changed itself from white to very pale blue, from very pale blue to pale green, from pale green to emerald green, to moss and lime green, to scintillas and sequins all dark green, all flowing away in a fount, a curve, a rush of light and dark, to end in a lacy fan, a spread of foam and jewel on the sand.

The two halves of this creature were so joined as to reveal no point of fusion where pearl woman, woman of a whiteness made of creaming water and clear sky merged with that half which belonged to the amphibious slide and rush of current that came up on the shore and shelved down the shore, tugging its half towards its proper home. The woman was the sea, the sea was woman. There was no flaw or seam, no wrinkle or stitch; the illusion, if illusion it was, held perfectly together, and the blood from one moved into and through and mingled with what must have been the ice-waters of the other.

"I wanted to run for help." The first boy seemed not to want to raise his voice. "But Skip said she was dead and there's no help for that. Is she?"

"She was never alive," said Chico. "Sure," he went on, feeling their eyes on him suddenly. "It's something left over from a film studio. Liquid rubber skinned over a steel frame. A prop, a dummy."

"Oh no, it's real!"

"We'll find a label somewhere," said Chico. "Here."

"Don't!" cried the first boy.

"Hell!" Chico touched the body to turn it, and stopped. He knelt there, his face changing.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom.

Chico took his hand away and looked at it. "I was wrong." His voice faded.

Tom took the woman's wrist. "There's a pulse."

"You're feeling your own heartbeat."

"I don't know . . . maybe . . . maybe . . ."

The woman was there, and her upper body was all moon pearl and tidal cream, and her lower body all slithering, ancient, green-black coins that slid upon themselves in the shift of wind and water.

"There's a trick somewhere," cried Chico suddenly.

"No. No!" Just as suddenly Tom burst out in laughter. "No trick. My God, my God, I feel great! I haven't felt so great since I was a kid."

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They walked slowly round her. A wave touched her white hand so that the fingers faintly, softly waved. The gesture was that of someone asking for another and another wave to come in and lift the fingers and then the wrist and then the arm and then the head and finally the body, and take all of them together back out to sea.

"Tom." Chico's mouth opened and closed. "Why don't you get our truck?"

Tom didn't move.

"You hear me?" said Chico.

"Yes, but—"

"But what? We could sell this somewhere, I don't know—the university, that aquarium at Seal Beach or—well, why couldn't we just set up a place? Look."

He shook Tom's arm.

"Drive to the pier. Buy three hundred pounds of chipped ice. When you take anything out of the water you need ice, don't you?"

"I never thought."

"Think about it. Get moving!"

"I don't know, Chico."

"What do you mean? She's real, isn't she?" He turned to the boys. "*You* say she's real, don't you? Well, then, what are we waiting for?"

"Chico," said Tom. "You'd better get the ice yourself."

"Someone's got to stay and make sure she doesn't go back out with the tide!"

"Chico," said Tom, "I don't know how to explain. I don't want to get that ice for you."

"I'll go myself, then. Look, boys, build the sand up here to keep the waves back. I'll give you five bucks apiece. Jump to it!"

The sides of the boys' faces were bronze-pink from the sun which was touching the horizon now. Their eyes were a bronze colour looking at Chico.

"My God," said Chico, "this is better than finding ambergris!" He ran to the top of the nearest dune, called, "Get to work!" and was gone . . .

Now Tom and the two boys were left with the lonely woman by the North Rock, and the sun was one-fourth of the way below the western horizon. The sand and the woman were pink-gold.

"Just a little line," whispered the second boy. He drew his fingernail along under his own chin gently. He nodded to the woman.

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Tom bent again to see the faint line under either side of her firm, white chin, the small, almost invisible line where the gills were or had been and were now almost sealed shut, invisible.

He looked at the face and the great strands of hair spread out in a lyre on the shore. " She's beautiful," he said.

The boys nodded without knowing it.

Behind them, a gull leapt up quickly from the dunes. The boys gasped and turned to stare.

Tom felt himself trembling. He saw the boys were trembling, too. A car horn hooted. Their eyes blinked, suddenly afraid. They looked up towards the highway.

A wave poured about the body, framing it in a clear, white pool of water.

Tom nodded the boys to one side.

The wave moved the body an inch in and two inches out towards the sea.

The next wave came and moved the body two inches in and six inches out towards the sea.

" But— " said the first boy.

Tom shook his head.

The third wave lifted the body two feet down towards the sea. The wave after that drifted the body another foot down the shingles, and the next three moved it six feet down.

The first boy cried out and ran after it.

Tom reached him and held his arm. The boy looked helpless and afraid and sad.

For a moment there were no more waves. Tom looked at the woman, thinking, She's true, she's real, she's mine; but she's dead. Or will be if she stays here.

" We can't let her go," said the first boy. " We can't, we just can't! "

The other boy stepped between the woman and the sea. " What would we do with her," he wanted to know, looking at Tom, " if we kept her? "

The first boy tried to think. " We could—we could . . . " He stopped and shook his head. " Oh, my gosh."

The second boy stepped out of the way and left a path from the woman to the sea.

The next wave was a big one. It came in and went out and the sand was empty. The whiteness was gone and the black diamonds and the great threads of the harp.

They stood by the edge of the sea, looking out, the man and the two boys, until they heard the truck driving up on the dunes behind them.

The last of the sun was gone.

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They heard footsteps running down the dunes and someone yelling.

They drove back in silence down the darkening beach in the light truck with the big-treaded tyres. The two boys sat in the rear on the bags of chipped ice.

After a long while, Chico began to swear steadily, half to himself, spitting out of the window.

"Three hundred pounds of ice. Three hundred *pounds* of ice. What do I do with it now? And I'm soaked to the skin, soaked! You didn't even move when I jumped in and swam out to look round. Idiot, idiot! You haven't changed. Like every other time, like always, you do nothing, nothing, just stand there, stand there; do nothing, nothing, just stare!"

"And what did you do, I ask, what?" said Tom in a tired voice, looking ahead. "The same as you always did, just the same, no different, no different at all. You should've seen yourself."

They dropped the boys off at their beach-house. The youngest spoke in a voice you could hardly hear against the wind. "Gosh, nobody'll ever believe . . ."

The two men drove down the coast and parked.

Chico sat for two or three minutes waiting for his fists to relax on his lap, and then he snorted, "Hell! I guess things turn out for the best." He took a deep breath.

"It's just come to me. Funny. Twenty, thirty years from now, middle of the night, our phone'll ring. It'll be one of those two boys, grown-up, calling long-distance from a bar somewhere. Middle of the night, them calling to ask one question. 'It's *true*, isn't it?' they'll say. 'It *did* happen, didn't it? Back in 1958, it really happened to *us*?'

"And we'll sit there on the edge of the bed, middle of the night, saying, 'Sure, boy, sure, it really happened to us in 1958.' And they'll say, 'Thanks,' and we'll say, 'Don't mention it, any old time.' And we'll all say good night. And maybe they won't call again for a couple of years."

The two men sat on their front steps in the dark.

"Tom?"

"What?"

Chico waited a moment.

"Tom, next week—you still moving out?"

Tom thought about it, a cigarette dead in his fingers.

"I don't know, Chico. I guess not."

. Now the silver looking-glasses advanced in a crumpling line all along the coast from a thousand miles north to a thousand

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miles south. The mirrors did not reflect so much as one building or one tree or one highway or one car or even one man himself. The mirrors reflected only the quiet moon and then shattered into a billion bits of glass that spread out in a glaze on the shore.

Then the sea was dark a while, preparing another line of mirrors to rear up and surprise the two men who sat there for a long time, never once blinking their eyes, waiting. © Ray Bradbury 1959

* * *

THE OLD SAILOR

by Elizabeth Riddell

The old sailor dreams of a little island
Rolling like an apple in the wide green sea,
A little island he could hold in his hand
Turn over this way and then that
Set a tree here, and there a nigger in a palm leaf hat.
He sailed all his life
Till his blood ran as salt as the sea,
His ship was his sweetheart and his wife.

And he passed many an island with no more
Than a glance at the bright white sand of the curving shore,
But now that the sailor is old
He would like a little island like an apple,
Just to look at and to hold.

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If you can't get on with two or one,
You're much better off with three . . .

She sits within the harem, the Sultan's chosen slave:
She spurns the chain of jewels that proud Almanzor gave;
The tyrant's haughty passion demands her love in vain,
Her young heart's first affection still holds her with no chain.

She sighs for sweet Circassia, and thither fain would go;
She thinks of distant fountains, and almost hears them flow;
But starting from the vision, some form she seems to seek,
She sees her gilded prison, and tears steal o'er her cheek.

Her lute lies there neglected, 'twas broken by her hand,
That lute, at least, shall never obey her lord's command.
Her lip may give him welcome, e'en smiles at last may come
But she will never sing him one song that breathes of home.

THOMAS HAYNES BAYLY, *The Circassian*

Sheikh, Pardner

" With a thunderous rush of heavy hoofs, the Desert Sheikh was upon her, and ere she could so much as scream, she found herself swung like a feather to his saddle-bow and whirled afar across the desert. . . On, on, into the setting sun—while his hot lips found hers and drank deep of her beauty the while they burnt her very flesh like fire. . ."

Ah-h-h-h-h. That was the stuff. . .

And even as the Cupid's bow of Maudie's mouth trembled with the words, there *was* a thunderous rush of heavy hoofs, two huge and powerful hands took her beneath the arms, and she was mightily hauled from the ground and dumped heavily on to a hard saddle—(Oo-er!)—and whirled afar across the Desert —on, on, into the setting sun . . .

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The Emir reined in his horse, dismounted, and lifted her to the ground. Her knees betrayed her, and she sat down with some suddenness, on the soft, warm sand.

The Emir seated himself beside her and took her hand.

" Lill' girl," he said, " will you marry me? "

P. C. WREN, *Beau Sabreur*

Bosphorescent?

Black Hassan from the Haram flies,
Nor bends on woman's form his eyes;
The unwonted chase each hour employs,
Yet shares he not the hunter's joys.
Not thus was Hassan wont to fly
When Leila dwelt in his Serai.
Doth Leila there no longer dwell?
That tale can only Hassan tell.

LORD BYRON, *The Giaour*

In the Wife Racket

" But mostly they hang around the harem."

" Roun' de which? "

" Harem."

" What's de harem? "

" The place where he keep his wives. Don't you know about a harem? Solomon had one: he had about a million wives."

" Why, yes, dat's so: I—I'd done forgot it. A harem's a bo'd'n-house, I reck'n. Mos' likely dey has rackety times in de nussery. En I reck'n de wives quarrels considerable: en dat 'crease de racket. Dey say Sollermun de wises' man dat ever live. I doan' take no stock in dat. Bekase why: would a wise man want to live in de mids' er sich a blim-blammin' all de time? No—deed he wouldn't. A wise man 'ud take en buil' a biler-factry: en den he could shet *down* de biler-factry when he want to res'."

MARK TWAIN,
Huckleberry Finn

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Put to the Plush

His happiest time was spent in his harem in company with his women and children, and it was here that Abdul Hamid showed himself at his most human and his most lovable. The whole tempo of the harem was modulated to suit his mood. If he was gay, the rooms re-echoed to the sound of music and of laughter, his slightest witticism was acclaimed as brilliant. If he was sad, the youngest of his odalisques drooped in gentle melancholy. . . .

Plush-upholstered furniture from Paris and Vienna, most of it in the worst of taste, contrasted with exquisite carpets and embroideries: worthless bric-à-brac and Swiss cuckoo-clocks flanked priceless porcelain vases, the gifts of Chinese emperors, while a mouse-trap, the Sultan's latest gadget from England, could be found on a silver table next to an agate, jewel-studded cigarette box. The same incongruities reflected in the women's dresses . . .

JOAN HASLIP, *The Sultan*
The Life of Abdul Hamid II

Sugar and Spice

The pet of the harem, Rose-in-Bloom,
Orders a feast in his favourite room—
Glittering squares of coloured ice,
Sweetened with syrup, tinctured with spice,
Creams, and cordials, and sugared dates,
Syrian apples, Othmance quinces,
Limes and citrons and apricots,
And wines that are known to Eastern princes.

T. B. ALDRICH, *When the Sultan Goes to Ispahan*

The Wisdom of Solomon

One day, when they had quarrelled for three weeks—all nine hundred and ninety-nine wives together—Suleiman-bin-Daoud went out for peace and quiet as usual . . .

RUDYARD KIPLING, *Just So Stories*

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SOMEONE IN THE BATH

Soap without bouquet
is so much more masculine

BY GUTHRIE WILSON

ONE evening Mrs. Billing came home to find a strange man in her bath.

Mrs. Billing had been staying in the country but, finding country pleasures less endearing than she had hoped, she had curtailed her holiday by several days. To be more precise, Mrs. Billing had found the absence of sewerage (or a septic system) at her aunt's country house quite unbearable, especially as the small outbuilding which she was required to attend for her body's health was permanently inhabited by spiders of menacing size and frightening inquisitiveness.

It was, therefore, with a stronger than usual sense of pleasure that she turned the key in her own front door, after tipping the taxi driver who had brought her cases up the steps. And when she stepped into her hall she glanced, with sensations of both pride and relief, from the familiar larkspur-pink walls to the toning mushroom shade of the carpet on which she was standing.

One by one she took her cases to her bedroom, whose colour motif was a crisp blue. She then removed her hat, gave her hair a touch, and was about to change her shoes for a more comfortable pair when there came to her ears noises which sounded very much like those made by someone splashing about in her bath.

Her hand, extended to pick out the shoes she was intending to wear, froze in the gesture of reaching forward. Her whole body, inclined gracefully above her bent left knee, became rigid. As she listened, with the colour draining from her handsome face, a very noisy car, which had begun to climb the road outside her house, blotted out the sounds that had so startled her, but she nevertheless remained motionless through two vehement changes of gear.

The interjection gave her several moments in which to collect her scattered wits; by the time the last raucous gear change had

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been made, she had assembled a number of plausible reasons for the splashing sounds. None of them included the presence of a body in her bath.

But when the road had fallen quiet again, splashing noises were borne to her so explicitly that she knew there was—really was—some person illegally disporting himself in her pink bath.

She went quickly to the second drawer on the left-hand side of her dressing-table. From it she took a pistol. With the confidence of one used to handling firearms, she flicked out the chamber to assure herself that it was loaded.

Holding the pistol in front of her with steadfast grip, she advanced upon the closed bathroom door, turned the handle, and marched in. Mrs. Billing was a woman of considerable resolution who might fear spiders in unmentionable places, but not a human intruder.

The man in the bath must have heard the door handle turn, because when she entered he was looking in her direction with an expression composed largely of surprise and confusion. Perturbation wouldn't be too strong a word.

His knees, she noticed, were protruding like hills from the generous level of the water, and she had time to observe that they were not skinny knees but solid, gracefully-turned knees. The part of his trunk which arose from the water displayed a broad chest, not too thickly covered with hair, the arms and shoulders of a man of athletic habits, and a head which might appear distinguished if the hair covering the forehead were dried and put into place.

She was, furthermore, able to make out a black moustache of military cut above a mouth which, despite the fact that at that moment it had dropped open to disclose a tongue whose unusual pinkness revealed no trace of either ulcers or fur, gave indications of good shape.

Mrs. Billing, directing the muzzle of the pistol at her visitor's head, said, "And who, pray, may *you* be? What are you doing in *my* bath?"

The stranger reached for Mrs. Billing's rose-pink bath flannel which he spread before him like a lap lap.

"I am a burglar," he said. You could tell that he had been to a good school from those few words.

Mrs. Billing appreciated this at once, but she didn't lower her pistol. "I wasn't aware that burglars bath," was what she replied. Very scornfully, too.

The man in the bath lifted his hands in a gesture, but dropped them quickly to grab at his lap lap which threatened to float

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away. "Those in the higher income bracket bath, I assure you."

"We haven't been introduced," Mrs. Billing said. "I'm Mrs. Billing."

"I know," her visitor replied. "I have often admired you from afar, Mrs. Billing." He laughed briefly in a rich, manly bass that sent shivers up Mrs. Billing's spine and caused the muzzle of her pistol to drop its aim to one of the elegant knees, the left one, which was the one nearer to her. "You'll forgive my sitting," he pleaded. "Unpardonable, really, but—er—circumstances, you might say. You *do* understand."

"Who are you?" Mrs. Billing asked.

"Price-Jones," he said. "Humphrey Price-Jones. *Colonel* Humphrey Price-Jones." He allowed his right knee to sink below the surface of the water. At the end of the bath the foot attached to that leg arose like a U-boat long submerged. It was the first time Mrs. Billing had seen a male foot in her bath for years and years. She examined it with the inquisitive and approving earnestness of a nurseryman regarding his prize-winning bloom.

"*That* is my professional name," the Colonel added. "Unfortunately my cards are in my waistcoat pocket. My waistcoat is hanging behind the door should you wish . . ."

"Do you really burgle?" Mrs. Billing asked. "You don't seem—you seem too much a . . ." She frowned at the bath water. Suddenly she sniffed—not contemptuously, not because she needed to blow her nose, but because her nose had become aware of a familiar and expensive odour in the room.

The Colonel smiled deprecatingly. "I must admit that I prefer soap without bouquet myself," he explained. "It's so much more masculine. But I had to make do with what I could find in your bathroom."

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Billing replied.

Colonel Price-Jones made an absolving gesture on the surface of the water with his lap lap. "It's a small thing," he said.

Then he frowned at Mrs. Billing from under his sodden hair. "You were about to say that I seem too much a gentleman to engage in burglary. Believe me, my dear lady, the profession of larceny is not the sordid occupation you have been led to believe. On a small scale—er—pilfering, shop-lifting, poof!—they are the squalid misdemeanours of a petty mind. But on the *grand* scale—and I may, without egoism, presume to claim that my operations are on that scale—my profession has its nobler side.

"You may not realise, dear lady, how misfortune can strike down a man such as I, reared in a gentle home, educated at the finest schools, who has given distinguished service to his country

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on battlefields all over the world. If society will not give to such a man the means to live in keeping with his station, such a man has an immemorial right, sanctified by knights and crusaders throughout history, to live off the country. The prerogative of an army to forage has never been questioned.

" A fortiori, dear lady, the right of the individual soldier similarly to forage is one which no association of men, no government even, should attempt to challenge. Burglary is a dangerous practice and danger will always call to men of courage. Courage is an attribute . . . "

" I don't know what to say," Mrs. Billing protested loudly, to stay the flow.

" If," said Colonel Price-Jones, " if you would retire I should be able to get out of the bath. The water is growing cold."

Mrs. Billing lowered her pistol arm.

" We could talk further when I am dressed," the Colonel suggested. " Perhaps over coffee."

He thought for a moment. " Black coffee," he said.

Mrs. Billing went to her kitchen. She was no fool, and although Colonel Price-Jones' words had been persuasive, he had said nothing to whitewash his way of life in her eyes.

Mrs. Billing was a fine-looking woman, although she would never see forty again. In her debutante year she had been the sweetest young woman you could have gazed on anywhere. As a bride she had been the loveliest—and probably the most photographed and most sighed-over—ever to flow down the aisle of a cathedral.

She had made a very satisfactory marriage. John Billing, heir to numerous Billing dairy farms, had seemed by no means an inappropriate match for a girl in a million. But tragedy had entered her life within weeks of her marriage: her husband had been thrown from his horse while playing polo, gravely damaging his spine, and the accident had proved fatal.

He had left his widow not perhaps a woman of wealth but certainly a woman of considerable substance, who had been able to buy a pleasant town house and live in modest comfort without working.

So much for an episode, not forgotten, but of the past, fifteen years behind Mrs. Billing. In the few years following her husband's death there had been claimants for Mrs. Billing's hand, but perhaps wrongly-conceived loyalty to the memory of her late husband had caused her to rebuff them. By the time she reached forty, Mrs. Billing had come to accept the inevitability —indeed the desirability—of remarriage, but all who might have proved worthy of her were already securely married.

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Therefore this astounding situation had arisen, that a woman whom maturity had not robbed of her bloom but indeed had only caused to grow in more extravagant beauty, who was equipped with enough capital to buy a farm, or a practice, or a fleet of haulage lorries, couldn't find a husband. Illicit offers from the already-married there were in plenty, but Mrs. Billing repulsed these bestial suggestions with the contempt that she was beginning to think they did not deserve.

It is, therefore, important to realise that for ten years Mrs. Billing had been keeping a pretty but concerned eye open for a suitable husband, and growing increasingly desperate as the fruitless years rolled by. At the time when she came home to find a man in her bath, she was at that point of desperation which might be described as her peak.

In the kitchen, cutting cucumber sandwiches and preparing coffee, she was thinking very hard. And what she thought and the conclusions she was coming to were these: first, that the Colonel was a remarkably well-put-together man; secondly that he was too good a man to devote his life to burglary; thirdly, that it was the duty of any good woman, thrown into his company, to turn him to nobler pursuits; fourthly, that the Colonel had somehow got control of the scene in the bathroom, and that he must quickly be put back in his subordinate position; and fifthly, that if Colonel Price-Jones thought he could walk into her home, use her bath, drink her coffee, and then walk out after a few smooth pleasantries, he was mistaken.

Mistaken, that is, about walking out.

She was getting together something that could be called a plan, of which the key element was that she had returned three days before she was expected; that no one, therefore, friend or neighbour or relation, would know of her return; in other words, that she had three days in which to tame the Colonel, if she felt like taming him.

What she was trying to work out was whether she did or whether she didn't want to tame him—to turn his habits away from the disreputable course they were now following, aiming him in the direction of things more worth while. Aiming him towards Mrs. Billing, for example.

His career in crime was to Mrs. Billing a considerable barrier; she being a nicely-reared, principled person and, up to this point, sensitively conventional in her approach.

As she gave the last triangular, cucumber sandwich a solicitous pat into position on the plate, she heard the bath water begin to run out. A few moments later, noises easily identifiable as those made by a person rubbing down the bath to remove the high-water

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mark came to her ears; and she had a picture at once of Colonel Humphrey Price-Jones wielding either the rose-pink face flannel or the shell-pink sponge on the sides of her bath. Whereupon, being a woman who by nature could make decisions and not swerve from them, she decided there and then that the Colonel was possessed of so many remarkable qualities that a mere matter of burglary should not be allowed to come between him and his redemption by a woman who was prepared to take an interest.

When the Colonel presented himself in her lounge, she was more than ever confident that her decision was the right one. For Colonel Price-Jones, with his hair and moustache pinpointing his strong and trustworthy face, in his lounge suit rather lighter in colour than that which is vulgarly known as charcoal, the revers had rolled edges, four buttons were arranged in line on each cuff, and a corner of a white silk handkerchief protruded from his top pocket, he was wearing his regimental tie emblazened with assagais, too—was the very epitome of breeding and virile masculinity.

Mrs. Billing, however, was ready for all eventualities. Knowing from experience that the beast may lurk beneath the smoothest male exterior, she kept her pistol on her lap, and touched it every now and again to demonstrate to the Colonel that the initiative on this battlefield lay with the enemy.

When the Colonel rose to pass her a sandwich, she waved the pistol at him, saying, " I respect your courtesy, Colonel. But I mistrust your intentions. You are a self-confessed thief, remember."

Plate in hand, the Colonel stared dismayed and affronted at her. He was, Mrs. Billing decided, about six feet two inches in height. It was the sort of height she liked. Weight—about fourteen stone, she guessed. And no paunch, she noticed. She disliked paunches.

Returning the plate to the coffee table, the Colonel said stiffly, " Burglar, dear lady, not *thief*, please."

" Is there any difference? "

" There is a world of difference. A thief is never a gentleman. A burglar may not be, but he often is. It's the same distinction that exists between the officer class and other ranks. I hope you see my point."

" Take two," Mrs. Billing suggested. " And sit down, Colonel."

He sat elegantly, she observed. He didn't thump back into his chair like a sack dropped there. He lowered himself like a—like a panther settling itself down. Like a male panther.

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"We have certain things to discuss, Colonel."

"We have," the Colonel agreed.

"I have several alternatives," Mrs. Billing told him. "Keeping you covered with my pistol—I am a very good shot, Colonel. At fifty paces I always cut out the pip on an ace."

"Remarkable!" the Colonel exclaimed. "Even I might fail to do that every time."

Mrs. Billing glanced round the room. "I sometimes practise here," she said. "Do you see the bullet holes beside that door?"

"I do," the Colonel said.

"Please count the number of holes."

There was silence while the Colonel counted. "Eleven," he said.

Mrs. Billing smiled at him. "I see that your mathematics are good."

"At school that was my best subject," the Colonel assured her. "And Latin. Latin is such a civilised subject, don't you think?"

"There are eleven holes," Mrs. Billing said. "I propose now to fire at the wall. There will be a report, of course, but I am sure your ears will not flinch from it. You will observe that the eleven holes already appearing on the wall are arranged to form a star, but that one point of the star is missing. With this shot I shall supply the missing point. Watch closely."

She raised her pistol. With the muzzle directed at the wall she glanced at the Colonel. "Don't attempt to spring," she warned him. "I can switch to another target extremely quickly, Colonel." She pressed the trigger.

The report was so subdued that it was apparent to the Colonel that Mrs. Billing's pistol was fitted with a silencer. On the wall the star had received its absent point.

"Remarkable!" the Colonel exclaimed. "Really remarkable! Only a cad would refuse to concede you full marks for that shot, dear Mrs. Billing. Do you practise much?"

"Every night," Mrs. Billing replied. "The plaster on the walls of this room is frequently renewed." She returned the pistol to her lap. "Now let us return to the alternatives confronting me. Keeping you covered, as I remarked before, I could telephone the police to tell them that I have apprehended a house-breaker."

"Burglar," the Colonel murmured.

"A burglar," Mrs. Billing agreed. "That is alternative number one. Or I could shoot you, and *then* ring the police. The explanation I should give to the police, I need not go into. It's obvious enough, and the pretext I should give—that of self-defence—would be quite acceptable. The only weakness is

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that I should have to explain how I came to be in possession of this pistol, but that shouldn't present great difficulty. It could be yours—dropped by you in our struggle."

"Struggle?" the Colonel asked.

"Not dropped," Mrs. Billing corrected herself. "Put down at the time when you began your assault upon me."

The Colonel stood up. He was very angry. "I do *not*, Mrs. Billing, assault a lady. Women—yes, if necessary. But ladies—definitely not. I wish to make that quite clear."

"Sit down," Mrs. Billing ordered. "The entire alternative is suppositious and unrelated to your actual behaviour, Colonel, which I am convinced would be as you say."

The Colonel sat. "Are there other alternatives?" he asked.

"How old are you?" Mrs. Billing inquired.

The Colonel looked surprised. "I am forty-five, madam," he said. "I skip before breakfast every morning. I am, I think I may say, in the physical condition of an athletic man much my junior."

Mrs. Billing coughed. "I think you may say that," she agreed. "We met in my bath, you may recall."

"I do apologise for that unfortunate incident," the Colonel exclaimed. "Absolutely unpardonable. But I was so convinced that you would not return for several days . . ."

"Are you married, Colonel?" Mrs. Billing asked.

The Colonel sighed.

"I'm a lover of the ladies, dear Mrs. Billing. But the life that I lead, a life packed with danger and the bitter-sweet tang of adventure, when each time that I lay my hand on a cluster of diamonds may be my last moment on earth—how could I expect any gentle lady to share the heartaches and anxieties that must be the constant companions of a burglar's mate! How could any man equipped with sensitivity and sensibility ask it? No, I am a bachelor."

Mrs. Billing leaned towards him, her throat like the neck of a swan, her large eyes flashing peculiar lights, her yellow hair, so expensively set, like a crown of gold. She said, "The third alternative is that you marry me."

The Colonel rose to his full six foot two. He said, "Dear lady, I have an appointment with a safe."

"Move one step," Mrs. Billing warned him, levelling her pistol, "and you're a dead dog."

"I hope," the Colonel said, "that I shall die like a soldier and a gentleman." He brought his heels together in a click of leather.

Mrs. Billing allowed her pistol to droop on to her lap. Her

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beautiful eyes filled with tears. A single sob escaped from her full, quivering lips.

"Am I so unattractive to you?" she wailed.

Like a male panther the Colonel leapt towards her. Up came the pistol. "Go back," Mrs. Billing commanded. "Sit down, Colonel."

"You," Colonel Price-Jones whispered, as he flexed his body into his chair, "you are the most adorable woman I have ever known. But marry you? I'm not a cad, madam. Colonel Price-Jones is not a cad. Dear Mrs. Billing, how could I ask you to share the tribulations of a master burglar?"

"You'd have to give that up," Mrs. Billing said.

The Colonel frowned. He looked at the floor.

"Do you smoke, Mrs. Billing?"

"Not now, please. Smoke yourself, if you wish."

The Colonel drew a cigarette from his gold-plated cigarette case. He lit it with flame from his gold-plated lighter which was adorned with regimental assagais. He lay back in his chair. "What is the value of this house?" he asked.

"Fifteen thousand pounds," Mrs. Billing replied. The Colonel blew out smoke.

"I allow myself five cigarettes each day," he explained. "Smoking helps to keep the weight down, and that is important to a man of my calling."

He appeared then to think for some time. "What is the—er—size of your income, Mrs. Billing?"

He waved his hand apologetically. "These mercenary questions are a bore, but I do insist that any change of occupation should involve no lowering of my station in life. You *will* understand that, I'm sure."

When Mrs. Billing named her satisfactory figures, the Colonel said thoughtfully, "I shall need time, of course. May I say that I regard you as the most adorable of ladies, dear Mrs. Billing. Your beauty is such that I can find no words to describe it. To a man of my nature, however, career is *very* important. I am reluctant to abandon it. Therefore I need time. If I may retire now—"

"You may not," Mrs. Billing said sharply, raising her pistol. "You will spend the night here, in my home. The guest-room is ready for you. You will first give me your word of honour, as a soldier and a gentleman, that you will make no attempt to escape."

The Colonel beamed. "My parole?" he exclaimed. "Delighted, dear lady."

"By the morning you will have made up your mind," Mrs. Billing said. "I can shoot even straighter by daylight."

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The Colonel rose, " I give you my word," he said. " The word of a Price-Jones is no light thing. And now, Mrs. Billing, will you please escort me to my bedroom? "

" March! " Mrs. Billing commanded. The Colonel marched and Mrs. Billing walked five paces behind him.

The Colonel said, " Before retiring, Mrs. Billing, there are one or two essential matters to attend to. Teeth and—"

" I shall take you there," Mrs. Billing said.

At the door of the guest-room the Colonel brought his hand to his brow in a gesture of despair. " Good heavens," he cried, " I have no pyjamas! I'll have to sleep in my underwear."

" Do you never sleep in your underwear? " Mrs. Billing asked shakily. The Colonel's exclamation had brought a flush to her cheeks, and a certain dryness to her lips, it seemed, because she licked them. She had, you will remember, seen the Colonel's gracefully-turned knee projecting from the bath water.

" Never," the Colonel assured her. " Not since the campaign against the Hoohoos twenty years ago. Burglars in the higher income bracket don't, you know." He leaned benevolently towards her. " Sleep well, dear lady, knowing that you have a strong protector in your home. A Price-Jones."

" Good night, dear Colonel," Mrs. Billing whispered. " I don't intend to sleep. With my little pistol I shall patrol the house till the light of day brings you to your decision. May it be the right one. For both our sakes, dear Colonel."

" Ah," the Colonel replied. " Ah . . . May it, as you say, dear lady, be the right one. And now, for the time being, upon this instant, as Shakespeare would have said, adieu."

The Colonel's decision, happily, *was* the right one. Two days later Mrs. Billing became Mrs. Humphrey Price-Jones. In all papers sly paragraphs about this marriage appeared—relating how Mrs. Billing had, they said, " pulled a fast one " by secretly marrying her devoted lover of so many, many years' intimate standing—the distinguished soldier and gentleman, Colonel Humphrey Price-Jones from Dorset.

It is pleasant to record that never was a marriage more satisfactory to each partner. Mrs. Billing's brief assessment of the Colonel's virtues as displayed in her bath proved to have foundation. He dressed impeccably, spoke and behaved like a gentleman-soldier, and his physique was capable of great feats of endurance. For his part, the Colonel discovered that his wife's possessions exceeded her claims, and that her beauty was not merely a matter of clothes and cosmetics.

Through Mrs. Billing's contacts, the Colonel's distinguished

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name was soon giving solidarity, as that of a director, to the prospectuses of several companies which otherwise might have had to pay as much as twelve and a half per cent to attract investors, but were required, with the Colonel at the helm, to offer only a little over half that. The Colonel's social attributes were such, too, that he very soon became the acknowledged leader of the set in which Mrs. Billing had moved.

Only one quarrel, and so minor was it that it hardly ruffled the surface, disturbed the halcyon bliss of their first two wedded years. In bed one evening, Mrs. Billing—Mrs. Price-Jones, that is—remarked to her husband, " Darling, I *do* think it would be wiser if you refrained from defending burglars so vigorously whenever they form the subject of conversation. Other people may not understand."

It would be as well to mention here that Mrs. Billing's pistol had, one memorable night, after a little ceremony, been tossed into the open sea from Brighton Pier.

No new bullet holes had appeared in the plaster of the lounge for the two years of their marriage. For, as the Colonel often said to her, " There is no longer any need for you to practise marksmanship. I am your strong right hand."

But this night, when Mrs. Billing told her husband that he shouldn't publicly defend burglars, the Colonel disagreed. " My dear, they need defending. People have such wrong ideas."

She replied, " They have, my love. But in view of certain things, I do think it would be better if you were to keep quiet—a decent reserve would, I feel, be the attitude most suited to you."

The Colonel then rose from his bed—he was wearing his pale-blue silk pyjamas edged with maroon, the ones with his initials on the pocket. He took up his pillow. " My pet," he said, " I'm not the sort of man to kick away the ladder by which I have, in the past, maintained my station in life. Only cads do that. After reflection, you will, I am confident, see that your—er—suggestion is gravely wounding to a man of my sensibility. I shall repair to the spare room in the hope that you will, by morning, see things as I see them."

It brought Mrs. Billing to heel before morning.

In the small hours she entered the spare room carrying her own pillow, and reconciliation was achieved.

Before day broke Mrs. Billing had agreed that there were few nobler callings than that of master-burglar of the upper-income bracket.

It was just as well she was taught to see things as her husband saw them because, in the next year, all the Colonel's companies

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folded, and drought dried up all the Billing dairy farms from which his wife derived her income.

When penury pressed upon them and they had already sold the second of their three cars, the Colonel took matters into his own hand.

One morning, over the breakfast table, he asked, " Did you hear me skipping on the path at six a.m. this morning, my love? "

Mrs. Billing agreed that she had heard.

" Did you attach any significance to this action on my part? "

His wife screwed her beautiful face into lines of inquiry. " You've been putting on weight," she said. " Just a trifle of fulness under the jaw . . . "

The Colonel sighed. " I know, I know," he agreed. " The—ah—girth, too." He looked at her sharply. " Nothing else? "

Mrs. Billing put the back of her hand to her lips in sudden horror. " You're not—it's not *that !* Not *that*, Humphrey! "

The Colonel nodded briskly. " I am the protector and the shield," he said. " When things go adversely, I have my talents which have rusted but can be oiled and used again, my love."

" But, Humphrey, you said that you would never submit me to the heartaches and anxieties which must be the constant companions of a master burglar's mate. You promised me that! "

" Ah," said the Colonel. " I have a further plan."

He cut a corner from a square of toast, buttered it, and slid it athletically into his mouth. For a moment he chewed. " The heartaches and anxieties to which I referred fall always upon women who must weep and wait—to the wives of soldiers and sailors and airmen and, yes, burglars, who sit at home dreading to hear the fateful news of a husband lost." He blew his nose.

" What if the wife were to *share*—yes, share the adventures of her husband? Where then would be the time for anxieties, the long, empty moments for heartaches? " He leapt from his chair, flung his arm around Mrs. Billing's shoulders.

" Darling," he whispered, " will you skip with me tomorrow morning at six a.m.? My pet, say that you will be my partner in the grand, new, free, adventurous life opening up for each of us! "

And Mrs. Billing agreed to give it a trial. For a whole month they skipped together, until deftness of limb had returned to her, and the slight softness under her husband's chin had quite disappeared. Only then were they ready to begin their new life.

At first, all Mrs. Billing was required to do was to hold the ladder still, or leg her husband through windows. But he was true to his word, and in next to no time he had disclosed to her all the secrets of his craft. Mrs. Billing, Mrs. Price-Jones, that is, proved remarkably adaptable so that her husband was enabled to

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reach out to projects previously beyond his reach—projects which had been impracticable because of the impossibility of insinuating his fourteen stone through narrow apertures, which his wife at just under ten could do on her ear.

It's pleasing to be able to write that this devoted couple is back in the higher-income bracket now.

And so this marriage, which had its beginnings in circumstances that were at least unusual, which developed into something approaching an idyll, met its shoal of financial disaster and triumphantly surmounted it. Hardly a cloud the size even of a fist now interrupts the clear azure of its heavenward spread. One tiny difference of opinion between them does exist, but it amounts to nothing. It is this.

Mrs. Billing wants to be allowed to carry a pistol on her expeditions, but her husband won't let her. He insists she shall be as well-groomed, whenever the bitter-sweet tang of adventure calls them out, as if she were about to take herself to an executives' dinner, but pistols he will *not* permit. For sometimes his wife suggests deeds of particular heroism, and the Colonel remembers only too well the unpredictable power of a pistol in the hands of a resolute woman.

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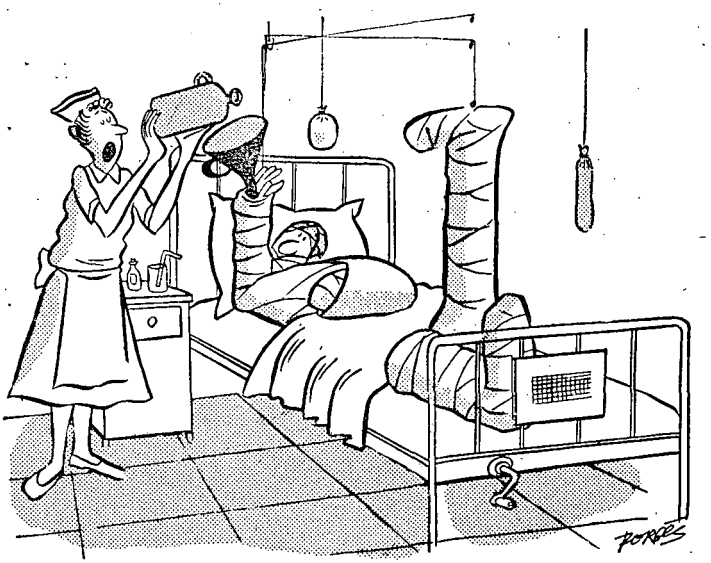

" Ready for your bath, Mr. Dillworth? "

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EAST INTO DANGER

BY PHILIP WYLIE

HIS hand was shaking, so he did not try the key: she might hear it rattle and greet him with one of those withering cynicisms that he seemed unable to answer.

"Pull yourself together, Mac," he whispered.

He stepped back from the door of his flat and stood in the hall, wondering if he could calm down. He went through the right gestures: breathed deeply; shook his head; drew the back of his hand across his brow; and ran his fingers through his short, curly hair—hair the colour of weathered redwood. Those gestures

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had sufficed after a too-close pass at a MiG, over Korea. They helped at the offices of Pan-Planet Airlines, when the President, James Griffin, sent urgently for a junior executive named MacDonald Farley.

Mac reflected that he'd probably learnt them in street fights when he was a slum kid. But they didn't help now.

Beyond the door was a different challenge, a girl named Talisman Gates, and also, for the past two years, Mrs. MacDonald Farley. He thrust the key into the lock.

As he swung open the door he tried to think, what do other men feel when the wives they love have consulted their lawyers and bought the tickets to Reno?

Shame? Frustration? Fury? Grief? Probably. But not the irony he felt now.

She wasn't in the living-room—the modern living-room that looked across Manhattan's East River through immense corner windows, making you feel the building floated . . .

He flung his overcoat and briefcase on the divan and went into the hall, filling it. Light from the main bedroom glowed on the metallic-papered walls. And there was even a second bedroom—for guests.

He halted. What would his mother have said of a son with a guest-room? All she'd had, after his father died, was one big room and a little one for the washtubs that had kept five brothers and sisters eating till they were old enough to sell papers, shine shoes.

That was it, of course—the difference of background.

Talisman was packing. Nearly packed, he saw, with an inward flinch.

"You're early," she said. The voice was low for a woman's.

He said, "Yes," and sat on the encumbered bed.

His grey eyes ricocheted from her now-empty wardrobe to the bare, glass top of her dressing-table. Then to her—Talisman, tall and ivory-skinned, her black-satin hair now in two convenient plaits, one over her shoulder as she bent down to put a shoecase into the largest of three matching suitcases on the bed. Their big bed.

"I sent a few things to be stored," she said, "and I told Emily that when she comes to clean tomorrow she can take everything else of mine I've left." Her face turned, and he gazed—stupidly, he felt—at the sloped eyebrows that made her dark eyes seem to slant.

His mind still refused to function properly. It was thinking of that first fancy-dress ball at which they met—of Talisman dressed as a geisha girl—and how he hadn't believed her when she told him her first name.

"My mother died when I was born," she had explained. "Daddy christened me Talisman because he said I was all the luck he had left."

All the luck—Mac thought bitterly—except that which makes

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the difference between the Lower and the Upper East Side of New York: in the case of her father, Estlyn Gates, about twenty million bucks' worth of luck.

"I don't want traces of me to haunt you, Mac," she went on. "Not when this becomes your bachelor flat."

"I see . . ."

What a thing to say! Did she believe the mere removal of objects would erase her memory? Were things so important to her? Then she would not understand how, in the months, the years—for how long ahead?—he'd be haunted. Haunted by a debutante who had gone to fancy-dress parties as Scheherazade. A girl who'd fallen in love with a football hero, waited while he became a hero of the Korean war, and—to his dumbfounded amazement—ardently reacted to his jittery murmur about marriage, made the day he was moved up to an executive position at Pan-Planet.

"Don't fidget so!" Talisman curtly interrupted his recollections and stopped his swinging foot. "After all, divorce happens to a lot of people."

Should he tell her? Tell her the preposterous, sardonic thing that had caused his early homecoming? He had to try.

"Look, Tal. Suppose things were to change, right away, at the office? I mean—so that we could live the way you want? Travel, see the world, stay in the best places, have fun."

She sat down on the bed, but not beside him.

"Darling, do we have to go through it again? I suppose you asked for a rise and got it. So what? I just wasn't brought up to live on a salary. Dad yearns to give us all we—all right, all *I* need." She saw he was going to speak, and amended again. "Want—even if I don't need it! So I'm spoilt! That's what you say."

He turned his head and looked at Talisman expressionlessly. "My wife," he answered heavily, "lives on my money."

She turned listlessly to the expensive luggage on the bed. "The day we came home from our honeymoon, I should have known. Can't you realise, Mac, what my sort of person is literally taught to need? I mean, for instance, that tweedy, darkish orange material of the living-room upholstery. It's exactly *that* colour because I snipped some of your hair while you slept on the beach one day and sent it to the decorator Dad had engaged. I never told you—you were so annoyed that Dad spent so much." She gave him a too-bright smile. "It was a lovely honeymoon. Nothing in my life will ever be as nice. But the rest . . ."

He knew. The rest was Talisman not going any more to the luxury resorts that her own set frequented—let alone Paris and Capri. The rest was Tal trying bravely to adjust—and seeming to, the first year. Then, it was catching Tal in tears because she hadn't the right clothes to accept somebody's invitation . . .

Stop it, he thought, and rose. No use trying any more. "Cocktail?"

"Might as well," she answered rather dolefully.

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A minute later, the bedroom extension buzzed. She sat motionless. It rang three times before she realised Mac could not hear. An electric mixer was whirring in the kitchen—to make his meticulous, delicious daiquiris, their last ones. She lifted the pastel-coloured instrument. "Hullo?"

"Mac home yet?"

"Oh, Daddy. Yes. Came in a few minutes ago."

"Then he's told you?" The voice of her father, deep and measured, had a rare undertone of impatience.

"Told me?" She hesitated, trying to think what special thing Mac had told her. "That Pan-Planet is going to give him a rise? Yes."

"Is that all the idiot told you?"

"There's more?" She sighed. "It couldn't matter, Dad."

"It could! To Mac, anyhow. Listen, Tal, this is business—and confidential." He spoke as a man thoroughly aware that his daughter could be trusted with business secrets. "Jim Griffin has just rung me. He can get delivery on some of the new passenger jet planes a full year ahead of all competing lines."

"How nice for Pan-Planet—and Jim Griffin!"

His tone took note of her sarcasm, cooled, stiffened. "What it means is that Pan-Planet intends to send the repair parts for the new planes to various foreign airports, disguised as spares for planes now in use. And to send out personnel, trained for the jets, but ostensibly assigned to other jobs. The idea is that Pan-Planet will get all set, secretly, to fly jets round the world; and then announce in national newspaper, radio, and TV advertising that their jet schedule will be in operation in a week."

"Whereupon," Tal said sarcastically, "competing lines will ditch their planes in the sea."

She then obliquely apologised for that mood, "It's a good idea, Dad. But how does it affect Mac? And why bother me with it at a time like this?"

"Because the thing cannot be set up from here. Someone has to go to the foreign airports, see the managers, divulge the plan confidentially, make sure all questions are answered. In other words, somebody must explain the scheme on the spot."

Her voice was taut. "They've chosen Mac?"

His was quieter. "No, Tal. They chose Mac and you. If Mac went alone, competing airlines might wonder—and consequently find out—why an engineering junior was spending so much time with the managers of airports where jets would eventually land. The man who sets up the show will have to be disguised, so to speak. Griffin's plan is this: when Pan-Planet gives an employee a big step up, they fly him, and often his wife, round the whole route, as a holiday bonus and a way to learn the foreign ropes.

"If Mac was able to go with you, and the trip succeeded, they'd promote him from engineering to a vice-presidency in the executive department. In charge of the jets under Jim himself. Now do you understand?"

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She said dully, " But he's an engineer—"

" And he's something more unique, a fine administrator."

" But—" her voice trembled—" he told Griffin he couldn't do it, because I'm flying to Reno tonight? "

" He said he'd think it over. Jim phoned me after that to see if I knew any reason why Mac didn't jump at it." Her father waited; then, unanswered, he went on. " So I told Jim about your divorce. He was completely stunned. Mac hasn't mentioned it at the office, hasn't shown his feelings. But Jim said he had to have a man *and* his wife make the trip so that it would seem purely a pre-promotion holiday. And Jim has several other bright lads at the office." He thought a moment, " With wives who are—well, prepared to play their part."

" Dad, I know you think this is all a mistake. I know you always liked Mac. Thought much more of him than of Hartley. But I've made up my mind. I can't—"

" It's your mind, Tal," he replied very quietly. " And you always did make it up yourself. Guess I taught you to." He hung up after a gentle, " Good luck, dear."

She was crying when Mac brought the cocktails, watching them attentively so as not to spill them. " Waited for you," he said, " where we usually have 'em. By the big windows. Who was that? " He put down the drinks, looked at her. " Tal, what's wrong? "

It was hard for her to talk, and that was unlike her, for Tal did her weeping alone: even then, sobs had not strangled her like this. At last, she said angrily, " Perhaps I'm spoilt, but I'm no rat! I don't let people down."

He tried, for the first time in a long while, to comfort her. " Anybody who says that has to deal with me."

" Father said . . ."

His face showed his amazement. " Your dad? "

Talisman reached for a handkerchief. Then she pushed away his hand, picked up her cocktail, and drank half of it. " The only question is, how sportsmanlike are you, if I do my part? "

" I don't understand, Tal."

His answer was edgy and not quite true. He was just beginning to guess.

" Oh—Dad told me about the trip. And why. They won't send you without me, so I feel a rat. But, Mac—" she stifled a sob—" it wouldn't make any difference to me now, if you were made President of Pan-Planet! We're just incompatible. The things I feel—you don't. The life you lead is too rigid and harsh for me. And I want to be married again, Mac. I want to be a wife, a mother. With you it just wouldn't work! I'd be wretched, so would any children. That's why I finally—"

" Don't tear yourself up about it any more, Tal. Or me. We tried—tried hard, and it's done. Besides, Hartley St. John is a fine chap . . ."

He'd never said anything about St. John in all their time of

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happiness or trouble: the man she had been expected to marry—the man she'd known all her life, one of her own smart set, who was every inch the athlete and evidently a hundred times the hero Mac had been.

His mention of the name caused her to start and then stare. "Did you think I was going to marry him after Reno?"

"Aren't you?"

Her lips trembled. "I—" she decided against voicing the first of her tangled thoughts—"I don't know, Mac. He told me he has some business in Idaho and he'd probably drop in to see me."

She clasped her head, not melodramatically but as if it ached, and rambled on almost apologetically. "When I was younger, he was like a brother. He took me to my first night club—unchaperoned. Bought my first champagne cocktail. He looked after me. Maybe I did once love him. Do, even. You came along, though."

She rose from the bed and began to unbraid her hair with shaky fingers. It fell loosely round her. She shook off her negligé—a garment as opalescent as a clearwing moth. "Hartley is coming to take me out for cocktails and dinner. To put me on the plane."

She turned suddenly, her face tilted to meet his. "I'll cancel Reno this time, and go with you, Mac." She said it steadily. "As a business deal. I may be spoilt, but I won't wreck a chance that would make all the difference in your life."

He didn't answer.

"In public—" her tone was already businesslike—"I'll be everything Jim's scheme requires: the devoted wife of the up-and-coming executive. I'll buy mad little things in Paris. We'll take snapshots of each other in the Roman Colosseum. We'll see the Parthenon together. I'll have no trouble playing the ecstatic wife out there. Not in public, I mean."

"And in private?" he interrupted jarringly.

"We'll always have two rooms, Mac, and no communicating door. Because there isn't any married love left to communicate. We'll say we usually take two rooms. Nobody'll know I always lock the door between us. Or that the last leg of our homeward trip is to be Reno, for me."

His face was clenched as a fist. "No."

Sloe eyes slid from his, and she stepped back. "I thought," she said huskily, "*you* were the unspoilt, self-made realist in what used to be our family. Look, I can't help you any other way, Mac. But how do you think I'll feel—for ever—if you don't accept what I can do now?

"In the rest of your life, you may never get so near your big ambition. Never reach the top at Pan-Planet. Or you may take twenty-five years to do what this trip offers. You'll blame me. I'll probably blame myself, too. But it actually would be because you are the spoilt one. Spoilt by vanity that you think is principle. By—your bad sportsmanship."

He no longer knew what he felt. No longer could make even

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a gesture of recovery. He stood there limply, and the doorbell rang.

She said in a stricken tone, "Is it five o'clock already?" He nodded. "Then, that's Hartley?"

Mac heard his voice say, "I'll take up your offer, Tal." And his voice kept on mechanically, "Get dressed. And cancel your Reno flight. I'll mix Hartley a drink, and tell him his date's off."

He looked at her with baffled eyes—then left the room swiftly.

Tony Drake, Pan-Planet's manager at Bangkok, reached a strong hand across his desk and said, "That about wraps it up, Mr. Farley." He grinned round the stub of his cigar. "It will give the competition fits when we spring jet travel on 'em a year before they expected it!"

Mac Farley took the hand in his even stronger one. He nodded soberly. "Yes. Provided the people I've left behind—from Paris right through to here—play the game."

The manager understood. "One leak, and the surprise is kaput. You have to tell a lot of people about this show, and it's tough to keep so many mouths shut for months. Still, even if someone leaks, we'll beat 'em with jets. Merely lose the surprise value, the big headlines." Drake was following Mac to the door. "Mrs. Farley enjoying your trip?"

Mac's brow furrowed, but his grin was honest.

"She loves travel. We had a wonderful time in Europe. Saw so many sights I'm mixed up about which tower leans—Eiffel or Pisa. And she adored India. I could hardly get her to leave Delhi."

"Sorry my wife and I couldn't meet her."

Mac flushed slightly. "She's had a busy time here in Bangkok. Met some old friends of her father's. Been shopping. And tired at night."

The manager seemed to accept that. He opened the door, and into his air-conditioned office surged the spicy heat of Thailand. "You look a bit peaky yourself. Compared with the last time I saw you in New York. Rough assignment, I guess."

Mac laughed. But he had noted the inference. Tony Drake was one of Pan-Planet's top field men; his wife had been one of Pan-Planet's first stewardesses; they felt snubbed by the up-and-coming young executive and his renowned but aloof wife.

A Pan-Planet car with a Thai driver took him towards the city over a paved road thick with the beast-hauled, bike-tinkling, burdened man-and-woman traffic of Bangkok. Radiant trees bearing torchlike flowers lined the way. It paralleled a klong or canal, where giant water-lilies grew, and naked children swam at their own klongside doorsteps. By and by, the red-tiled pagoda roof of a temple and a gold stupa, a huge, round tower, gleamed in the distance. The stupa, he thought, looked like the gilded ornament people put on the top spire of a Christmas tree, ornaments his mother had never been able to afford . . .

Mac had intended to go straight to the hotel. He changed his mind. Talisman would be there; but so, probably, would Hartley

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St. John. His watch, already fogged by the hot, damp air, said eleven-fifteen.

They'd be in the bar together, enjoying a Singapore gin sling and having fun trying to make out what the Thais were saying. Or perhaps Hartley spoke Siamese.

Hartley St. John had not accompanied them, or even followed them. Not exactly, Mac told himself. He'd accidentally run into them in Beirut—with a plausible reason. He owned stock in a corporation with vast Middle East oil holdings; things in that area were uneasy, and St. John was a gifted trouble-shooter. He did speak some Arabic, if not Siamese. Arabic, Mac thought with a kind of fury, and French that made his own collegiate stammer ridiculous; German, too. And that smattering of other languages he often inserted, with translations, into his glamorous, incessant narratives of his adventures.

St. John's next appearance, in Delhi, was because (he said) a board of directors in Manhattan needed a business chore done quickly in India. And when the board found Hartley was already in Lebanon—well, they just cabled. He had certainly visited some mills, but he had also seen a good deal of Talisman in Delhi.

And now, here he was in Bangkok. For old times' sake, he said. He'd been parachuted into Thailand during the Japanese occupation as an agent of the OSS. But then, Mac reflected, he'd told of being parachuted into Italy, too, and among the Free French.

That was the trouble with Hartley St. John.

There was nothing on earth he hadn't done better than you, or didn't know more about. Which, Mac reflected, came from the fact that his family, unlike the Farleys, had been rich. Rich kids travel, learn languages, and get ahead young. Poor kids sell newspapers. But Mac admitted Hartley had used his education brilliantly. In war, in business, and now, it seemed, in love. Mac broke off his maundering.

He stepped into sunlight hot as molten iron, dismissed the driver, and cut hazardously across traffic that streamed both ways unceasingly: lorries, bikes, cars, wagons, the pedicabs called samlors, and a newer kind—rickshaws attached to motorcycles that squealed round corners and scared tourist passengers. He dodged people with trays on their heads, boys hauling old men in rickshaws, and tiny, pretty, girl bicyclists with coolie hats tied under their chins: a two-way river of unfamiliar vehicles and people.

Sweating now, he crossed to the other side of the teeming street, passed three shops, and looked into a fourth. He wanted to see, in daylight, a vase he'd noticed the evening before, when Tal and Hartley and he were on the way to a restaurant. The vase was as beautiful as his first glance had suggested. Simply carved, highly polished, made long ago from a lucent, green stone. Jade, perhaps. Ten inches high? Eight, he thought. He could imagine it holding a yellow rose—eye-catching in any room on earth. He went inside the shop, marvelling that a mere objet d'art could be so fascinating—so satisfying.

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He pointed to the vase. "How much?"

The Chinese proprietor looked at the customer, recognising his nationality, then at the vase.

"Hundred dollar."

Mac was not surprised: it seemed worth a hundred dollars. But it surprised him that he went on wanting it. Tal bought things wastefully; Mac—never.

"Give you sixty."

He went out, half an hour later, feeling guilty and pleased. He'd paid almost seventy dollars for an alleged antique carved from what the Chinese had insisted was "one-piece, precious-stone-all-jade." Probably glass, Mac thought, now that he owned it. He'd smuggle it into his bag, keep it out of sight, and ask somebody who knew before he showed it to Talisman. If he ever did.

He headed reluctantly for his hotel, and knocked on Tal's door. No answer—as usual. He tried the handle of the door. Locked—as always. He stripped off his light jacket, tie, and sodden shirt. If I'd known, he thought wearily, what an ordeal it would be . . .

Why had he consented? he'd asked himself interminably. For there seemed to be an almost guilty element in their deal—like cheating, but in reverse. And yet . . .

He refused again to acknowledge the true answer. Tal's offer had been spirited and generous and sensible. Yet he had not accepted solely for her logical reasons. He'd wanted to spend a little more time with the only woman he'd ever desired, and he knew this was beyond all logic.

Might as well eat, he thought, and as he went into the bar-restaurant he saw them. A woman, radiantly lovely in the American way, yet so exotic that Thais and Chinese often looked twice. The beautiful woman was being shown a Thai table game that involved bamboo counters and coloured sticks; the demonstrator was a man inches over six feet, grey-templed, film-star handsome.

My wife, Mac thought, and her first beau.

The waiter and half a dozen Thai diners watched the pair with that small smile the whole world accords lovers. Hartley was talking about the game, "It's something like the kite-fights, Tal. The male counters and male sticks attack the females." His eyes flashed. Hers answered, dark, luminous, beguiled. "I learnt to play it when I holed up with a Thai village family. The Japs were thick as the cobras in that area. Had to shoot my way out, finally. Killed three of the little Nips and ran for it." His tone flattened. "Oh, Mac. I'm teaching your wife a local game."

Mac thought of answering, The game you're trying to teach her is hardly local. It was the sort of crack Talisman's brittle friends made. But after all, the wisecrack wouldn't fit. His wife was not his wife, precisely.

"We were waiting for you. I'm starving," Tal said, and added, "everything go all right?" Mac merely nodded as he sat down. Hartley beckoned for a waiter to bring menus before Mac thought of doing so. It was invariably like that; and Tal always noticed.

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Hartley ordered a drink for Mac and began to explain Thai foods to Talisman in a knowing, private fashion.

Mac thought, Hartley's rude even when he's most polite. And there was something else about him: something wooden in his face, something phoney, or unreal, or insecure that often made him upstage when he had no need to be.

And he talks too much about his feats of derring-do, Mac reflected. Why go into that Jap-shooting routine just now? Good soldiers who've done a lot of shooting don't use it for small talk—*or* for courting girls. Mac sat, wondering; a little selfconscious, full of ache.

Hartley looked up from the menu he shared with Tal. "By the way, Mac, I hope you're not tired of my butting in? It turns out I'll be on your flight this afternoon. One of the freighters in a shipping company I own a piece of wants an on-the-spot decision about cargo in Hong Kong."

Mac felt a change in himself—abrupt, surprising. This was becoming absurd. Why didn't Hartley just say, straight out, I've loved your wife for fifteen years and now she's mine? Why all the excuses? Mac perceived his inner anguish might be somewhat quenched by an act of which he'd always thought himself incapable: an act of social hypocrisy. Tal always said he was too honest to have good manners. Well, then . . .

His answering smile looked genuine, his voice sounded warm.

"Good heavens, old boy," Mac boomed, "tired of you? I'm delighted. And so's Tal. Why not travel with us from Hong Kong? Tokyo, Honolulu—and home? Great to have you!"

Hartley said, "Why—why, I might." But his voice jangled. And Mac had a further satisfaction: Talisman was gazing at him with amazement.

If that's what they call manners, Mac thought, I'll give that lean superman enough courtesy to choke on. And, suddenly, he was hungry for the first time for days . . .

At four o'clock, the plane was airborne. Its passengers settled for the hours ahead—the hours between Bangkok, capital of Thailand, and Hong Kong.

Only the children on board bothered to look through the windows at heat-hazed Bangkok—a thousand temples, stupas, and pagodas that made it more like dreamland than a city. Only children and Mac.

Things were going well on the business side, he thought. Even Tony Drake, the Pan-Planet manager, was now satisfied, for he had brought his wife to see them off.

That had been Talisman's suggestion. As they'd climbed the broad hotel staircase after lunch to pack, Mac had told her grimly that she was no longer keeping her end of their bargain. "Drake said pointedly they regretted not meeting you."

Tal had been surprisingly apologetic. "Oh, Mac, I'm so sorry. I felt too tired to go visiting the night we arrived. And after that—"

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She bit her lip. " All right. I did too much shopping and motoring with Hartley. But can't they see us off today? Early tea at the airport? " Thus the Drakes were mollified. Almost anybody could be appeased by Tal, if she put her mind to it.

Mac sighed, shook his head. The plane hoisted into thick clouds and the seat-belt sign went out.

He spent some time on the flight deck, talking shop with the captain, Dave Porter. They had met at a company banquet in New York. The co-pilot, Joe Strong, was new to Mac. Both good men, though.

When Mac returned to the cabin, Tal was not in her seat. Down in the lounge with—he glanced diagonally across the aisle and confirmed it—Hartley. He decided to join them.

Tal and Hartley were playing gin rummy. They didn't welcome him. He ordered a highball from the Japanese stewardess. The other, a blonde, came from Milwaukee, Dave had said. Mac then stretched on the seat as if there was nothing more pleasing to him than to sit looking at clouds through portholes, while his wife practically held hands, and sometimes touched heads, with his rival. Rival? The man who had won.

As always on planes, he subconsciously noticed details of the flight. The plane had levelled at about ten thousand feet. Thick overcast below; below that, the South China Sea. Above them, another overcast, gauzy and high: a weather front moving in. At their level, the air was smooth. It was almost twilight. Too bad there wouldn't be a sunset. Mac revelled in sunsets seen from their gaudy midst—even above Korea when he had hunted, and been hunted by, MiGs.

He reflected, much later, how strange it was he happened just then to remember MiGs.

For he saw one.

Old habits ordered action. He almost intoned, " MiG at three o'clock! Collison course! This is Baker Noble five—" But in the next split second he realised he was flying in a whale-shaped passenger plane carrying tourists and Oriental businessmen. Yet, why was a military plane apparently about to intercept a non-combatant American aircraft?

He heard Hartley St. John mutter—then saw him leap to a porthole across the lounge.

The MiG bored in, and lifted slightly. Its machine guns started blazing. Tiny fireballs drew straight lines towards the airliner. The fighter went up and over. Then tracers came from the opposite direction, where another MiG was coming in, firing.

Hartley spoke quite steadily, " We must have drifted closer to Red territory than we reckoned. Double overcast, after all."

Talisman said dazedly, " Those planes are shooting at us."

" They've shot up civilian passenger planes before." Hartley sounded interested, not frightened. Mac admired his aplomb; for Mac was scared. He began to draw deep breaths.

A third MiG made a pass at the plane, followed by a larger

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propeller-driven craft which took a position above and diagonally behind the Pan-Planet passenger plane. Then it throttled back to the same speed.

The Japanese stewardess called sharply, "Please hurry up to the main deck!"

"Certainly not," Hartley answered. He smiled at the pretty girl and then at Talisman. "Those apes are probably trying to knock off the radio antennae. So it's safer down here!"

The girl touched her stewardess cap, as if to reassure herself of her authority and duty. "There are radio aerials under us also!" She looked down at the carpeted deck.

Hartley instantly bounded towards the staircase. There he checked himself, wheeled, and encircled Talisman's waist. He lifted her on to the stairs. To Mac, he said, "After you, Farley." It was no time for courtesies. Mac ran up the steps behind his wife. But he had noticed that Hartley's first leap had been one of self-preservation, and only second thoughts had given his action a gloss of chivalry.

The cabin was in uproar: screams, yells, sobs smothered in handkerchiefs, oaths, orders, and counter orders. The warning lights were on.

Mac locked Tal's belt. Then, with Joe Strong and the navigator, he helped the stewardesses get other people seated and belted. If the passengers hadn't been swiftly buckled up, Mac knew, they'd be running in the aisle in panic. The MiGs had stopped strafing.

He winked at a trembling old lady, ruffled a boy's hair, joined Tal, and took her hand. "We're O.K.," he said. "They couldn't have tried to shoot down our radio antennae. Too tricky. The plane's not holed."

"How reassuring!" Her voice was ironic, her cheeks wan.

"Pressurised. Air would rush out. Apt to flip people around, shoot your breath out. Though we're fairly low, about ten thousand—"

"I'm scared, Mac!"

"Who isn't?"

Her eyes narrowed a little. "Hartley isn't scared."

He didn't argue. Diagonally ahead, St. John seemed calm. Mac gazed at him, wondering what either one of them could do next, and was interrupted by the admonitory rattle of loud speakers on the intercom system. "This is your captain, Dave Porter. We have just been intercepted by three jet fighters marked with the Communist red star, who ordered us to keep radio silence."

The voice paused, went on grimly, "The order was backed up by bullets. We are now being followed by a plane equipped to jam any signals we send. We have been told we are to ditch when ordered. We were informed the sea is glassy, with a long, shallow swell, and the clouds below have an eighteen-hundred-foot ceiling. The landing should be possible, and the plane will float if landed whole. This came with no warning. We were unable to send any SOS. However, Manila, Hong Kong, and Bangkok

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know our estimated position. Our attackers claim we are inside their territorial waters."

He sounded businesslike, Mac thought. The way men with responsibility had to sound when things were going wrong.

The captain went on, "I have no alternative but to obey their orders. I cannot risk being shot down. The Reds have done that to passenger planes before." He paused. "That is about all for now. Remain in your seats, belts fastened. Keep calm. The plane was not hit. Just deliberate near-misses. As I get information, I'll relay it to you. We're now going into a long glide."

"Our position. What is it? According to you, and to them?" Hartley asked imperatively.

The captain could not hear him, of course. But the blonde stewardess hurried through the bulkhead door.

Moments later, Porter's voice crackled again, "Our position is south and east of Hainan Island, more than a hundred miles. The double-overcast makes exact reckoning impossible. I'm turning west and north now, on command. There is no chance, however, that we flew even close to Red Chinese waters. We were far offshore."

In the cabin, when the loud speakers went silent, a stonier stillness fell. Small sounds slowly began to break it—a baby fretting; two Chinese businessmen resuming, with higher voices, a conversation begun with the take-off; and the mumble of an old woman in prayer. The plane speeded up. Mac could imagine why: their captors wanted them well within Red sea boundaries when they ditched, and probably wanted them to ditch before dark.

Daylight would increase the chances that the plane could land safely.

Time passed. Once Tal, clinging to his hand now, murmured, "I always wondered what real danger would be like. I don't mean a bad rock climb in the Alps or taking a horse over a high fence. I mean danger that's deliberate, that's imposed on you by an enemy."

Mac turned to her, and the compassion in his eyes brought momentary tears to hers. He realised what she was thinking. He had experienced, all too often, danger imposed by an enemy. He felt her shudder slightly, saw her gaze shift to Hartley's steady shoulders. But she seemed to find no assurance there—or anywhere.

"It's a hideous feeling, Mac," she whispered raggedly. "I hate it." She thrust at him her now-icy hand. "They're Communists, and we've been captured by them. Hasn't it dawned on you they want someone—or something—on this plane? And don't you know what Chinese Communists do to people they take prisoner—?"

Mac interrupted. "Look, Tal, in this kind of danger the first rule is to take it as it comes. Try not to imagine . . ."

"I'm trying," she gasped. "But—"

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Mac wondered. Here was the woman he loved. Here, a danger he'd known, detested. Danger few women and very few civilian men ever faced. Perhaps death, too, and soon. How would Tal behave? And how, he thought, in a self-derisive question he'd asked before, how would he behave?

The loud speaker crackled again, and the passengers froze to listen. The captain was still almost casual, "In a minute, we're going to dump fuel. You'll smell it. Don't be frightened. It'll make things better for landing. Absolutely no smoking; and check all ashtrays."

Nobody was smoking—the sign had been on since the assault began. But stewardesses bustled to make sure.

"One caught fire, dumping fuel—" Tal began.

"Stop that," Mac interrupted.

"And it's pretty hard to land this kind of plane at sea without it breaking in two, isn't it?" Her slanted eyes darted towards Hartley, who must have been aware of her gaze.

He pivoted in his seat, laughed, made the "all's well" gesture of circled thumb and finger. But he wasn't, in fact, quite so calm; Mac wondered if Tal had noticed the tremor in his gesture, the beads of sweat on his forehead.

She tried to smile and faltered. She looked away from Hartley, out of the window.

"That big plane's not following us, Mac," she said suddenly. Then she exclaimed. "Oh!" She had detected the first, faint, raw odour of fuel—an odour which swiftly became stronger. She went on, too calmly, "The plane climbed above us to get out of the way of our fuel. Why, of course. Didn't it?"

"Yes, Tal."

A moment passed. "Mac, I'm going to panic!" Her voice broke.

As if he was certain, he answered, "No, you're not, Tal."

What did the Red Chinese want that made them take such immense risks? Something on the plane? Or, as Talisman had suggested, some person? Wouldn't the act mean war? It would, he realised, unless the end of this appalling flight was arranged to look like an accident: a blotting-out of plane, crew, and passengers with no radioed warning or word. And, of course, their captors could make it look that way, once they had accomplished their unguessable purpose.

Had Tal thought of that? Thought of how little likelihood there was that she, or anyone on board, would live through the approaching night?

He looked at her and she turned. "I guess," she said huskily, "we're finished. I'm sorry about some things, Mac." She was pulling herself together; he had a flashing sensation of pride.

Then the plane entered the lower clouds and made several wrenching turns. It came out over a grey, late-afternoon sea, with a fighter plane visible alongside.

Loud speakers spluttered again. The strain in the captain's voice was apparent now. "We have ten more minutes to get ready

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to ditch. Follow instructions. If the stewardesses need help, they'll tap whoever they want. Everybody else stay in their seats, belts fastened . . ."

Mac felt a hand on his shoulder, and the Japanese stewardess said, "You, please. To help with the children . . ."

"Get all the coats," Mac answered, opening his belt. "I'll bring up cushions and loose upholstery from the lounge. You might ask Mr. St. John, too." He pointed. "He's apparently been O.K. in even tighter spots."

Ten minutes of fevered work. The children and old people were buffered against impact. People in the tail section were moved forward. Tal, though he argued violently, refused more than her own coat and the allotted pillow. Time was called by Captain Porter when Hartley, still in possession of a lounge seat-cushion, shrugged with seeming embarrassment and wrapped it round—himself.

Human silence, tangible as rock: a soundless unity of every person's prayer. The plane banked slightly, and Mac glimpsed close water. The flaps started down to vertical, and the great plane slowed as Mac prayed for the man at the controls who dared come so near to stalling speed. Who *had* to dare that. In his mind, Mac flew the plane through the twilight.

Engines roared with sudden, terrifying full power: Porter had saved fuel enough for that. Mac turned to Tal, "This is where we go splash." He put his arm across her chest and gripped the window-sill so that the impending crash would have to rip him and his arm loose before Talisman was hurtled forward.

They hit. All power was cut. Wings of water exploded. Loose things in the racks overhead hurtled into the cabin. Sound came: screams, grunts, yells, as the passengers were jammed against the safety belts. Mac, listening, hardly noticed the belt pressure.

The plane, which had come down like a ski in a jump, swiftly levelled. It cut a geysering path, slowed perceptibly, and settled more than Mac had expected. Then the flaps hit with a wrenching sound, a dull sensation of impediment—and the plane shot ahead abruptly.

In seconds they stood still. There was a new, total silence; water gurgled beneath them. Mac lifted himself, looked beyond Tal and saw they were resting on the great wings. Emptied of fuel, they would float the plane indefinitely—if she wasn't holed below her waterline.

The door to the flight deck opened. Joe Strong appeared, chalk-white. "Everybody stay seated," he shouted. Followed by the flight engineer, he raced to the spiral staircase that led down to the lounge, now below sea level. Thumps and grating noises came from there. People began babbling, exchanging nods; some even grinned. The pilot hadn't cracked the plane in two, set it afire, hurled its passengers in a human lump against the forward bulk-heads, or dived into the sea to drown.

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Stewardesses were quickly asking everyone, "Are you hurt?"

Mac examined Tal, and winked at her afterwards. She seemed all right. Next, he spotted a woman who had fainted; then, a middle-aged man stiff with shock, or perhaps a heart attack; and a pretty girl who answered the stewardess by holding out a bleeding hand. Minor cut, Mac was sure. He looked at Hartley. Inch by inch, the dark, urbane man twisted in his seat and gave them, shakily, his thumb-finger salute. But he looked very shaken.

The two officers pounded up the stairs, raced through the cabin, slammed the door. And people waited. Children cried. Very soon Captain Porter appeared. He leaned, white-faced, against the door, but spoke in a clear voice, "Well, we're down. No damage that'll make it necessary to abandon ship."

Mac felt a great surge of pride. "Dave," he called, "that landing was magnificent!" People followed suit, shouting praise, even clapping hands.

Captain Porter laughed a little. "Thanks, all! And listen. We're to be taken in tow to land. Hainan Island, doubtless. The plane will tow decently, I think. Please keep your seats, we don't want to rock the boat." He smiled, and left.

By and by the cabin lights went on and off. The last grey shimmer of day drained from sea and sky. Thumping occurred up forward; the passengers heard faint voices outside the plane. At last, with a little nudging pull, the plane started forward.

Time passed, again agonisingly.

A man with grey hair and square shoulders rose, and entered the cabin before the blonde stewardess could stop him. Some minutes later he came out.

Then Hartley went forward, also ignoring the stewardess' order to stay in his seat. He was gone quite a while, and when he came back he went to Mac. "Skipper wants you. I'll hold Tal's hand while you're gone."

Mac was led through the blacked-out cabin by a stewardess with a small flashlight. On the flight deck the crew were slumped at their places. The night sea showed where it curled whitely under the edges of the wings. The ship towing them was blacked out, too; not even its silhouette could be seen.

"Sit down." Dave Porter was glum-voiced. Mac took the co-pilot's seat. "I didn't know why this happened," Porter said. "Now I do."

When Mac just waited, he continued bitterly, "A piece of military equipment, a new gadget that has something to do with triggering our newest H-bomb, is on board this plane. The Reds want that. Enough to force us down, tow us ashore, get it, and then—"

"Tow us out, blow us up, and let the world think there was another commercial plane accident," Mac said evenly. "One never to be solved, because not even wreckage will be found." At Dave's barely visible nod, Mac's voice sharpened. "How was a piece of gear like this ever permitted on a commercial plane?"

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"The Pentagon sent two down to Australia, co-operating in a test with the British. One blew up in the test, as planned. This was a spare. Supposed to come back to us by military planes—Australia to Java to Bangkok, and so on. Red agents nearly intercepted it in Jakarta, and the colonel in charge got the wind up. So he packed it in his luggage—it's only about a twenty-pound gadget—and came on with it, as a civilian." Dave said something violent under his breath. "He's just explained. More than necessary. I mean, that the Reds evidently kept track of it and him, and so got us."

Mac remembered the military look of the first man who'd gone forward. "Maybe we could bargain with 'em."

"No chance," Dave answered slowly. "It's now under water in the hold, and we daren't open the compartments. But your friend, Hartley St. John, has an idea."

"I saw him come up."

"Know him well?"

"Pretty well," Mac answered. "What's his idea?"

"Wants us to sneak him overboard in a rubber boat and let him drop back. He assumes the U.S. Navy will be scouring this whole Gulf of Tonkin in a matter of hours. He thinks the Reds will tow us into some cover and hide the plane from air-sea search, so as to be sure to have time to drain and search it. It isn't too illogical. And in the meantime, he might be spotted by our Navy, while we're still alive, but not spottable. Is he in Central Intelligence?"

"I don't know." Mac was startled. "He was OSS in the war. He told you he is now in CIA?"

The captain shrugged. "Those birds don't carry identification. But I need advice—and you're a company executive." His voice became harsher. "Maybe I need restraint! The colonel smuggled that military thing aboard a civilian aeroplane against every regulation, and his bright idea will probably get fifty-two people murdered."

"Let the Pentagon handle him, if he lives to be handled."

"He thought if he got the thing into Hong Kong he'd be O.K.," said Porter bitterly. "Guess he would have been. But he didn't. What about St. John?"

"What about two men? Two boats?" Mac answered.

He felt again the familiar thrust of jealousy. Hartley had had an idea, and acted first.

"You?" Porter caught the sound of assent and shook his head. "No. We have only one small raft. The rest are too big. Anyhow, they may have a pretty good idea of the passenger list from Bangkok agents. You might be missed, especially with your wife still on board. No. If we send anybody over, it'll be St. John. They'd also miss a crew member. I've decided on that. It's risky in any case. At dawn, this offshore water will be full of sampans and junks. Red Chinese fishermen. More likely any raft we drop will be spotted by them, rather than by our Navy."

"St. John knows that?"

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" Yes. He wants signal bombs. A pistol. Some food and water. I'll keep half our signal stuff, in case we have a chance to use it. Which I doubt. Your pal seemed eager to go. Almost too eager." He waved towards the night where a ship pulled them steadily ahead. " Maybe I'm wrong. But I thought St. John was more eager to escape whatever lies ahead of us, than he was to try to get rescue."

" Does that matter," Mac asked after a moment, " if the Navy spots him in time? "

Porter considered. " Guess not. We'd better get going if we intend to do it. That looks like faint shore lights up ahead."

Soon, an emergency exit was opened. The small, rubber boat was inflated on a wing. Hartley, muffled in borrowed sweaters and carrying a .45 in one hand, a small torch in the other, strode to Talisman's seat, bent, and kissed her passionately. " Wish me luck," he whispered.

Mac, waiting at the exit with Porter, saw him push the raft off the wing and slip out of sight in the plane's gurgling wake.

Mac came back to his seat. " Isn't Hartley marvellous! " Tal murmured. " He told me his plan."

" Sh! No one but the crew knows why we had that exit open," Mac said. " And the crew won't talk when we're boarded. Not easily, anyhow."

An hour brought change: the murky lights of a small village. Then, boat-sounds and voices all round. The plane coasted to a stop, and started again, turning slowly.

From the window, Tal reported, " Sampans with lanterns. It must be clearing, Mac. I can see stars." After a while she whispered excitedly, " We're near a beach! " But the ship was not beached. Voices of men, loud with exertion, penetrated the tense cabin. " We're being pulled with ropes into some sort of cove," Tal whispered. " And the stars don't show any more. There must be big trees hanging over." The slow, surging progress stopped.

Mac muttered, " Grounded. And out of sight from sea or air! "

Captain Porter's voice in the darkness startled the murmurous group, " We're moored. Here are the orders. We're all to stay aboard for the night. We'll serve food, the best we can. You might as well sleep, if possible. Don't mill about. We're surrounded by armed guards, so don't get the idea of trying to open an exit and run: you'd be shot. Be as calm as you can. And thanks for your fine co-operation."

Someone called, " Why don't they take us ashore? "

" My guess is, they're waiting for higher authority to come from the mainland in the morning. And this plane's a better gaol than anything on shore. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine."

He had said nothing about the top-secret device stored illegally in the luggage hold. Daylight would make it easier to find. News of it would certainly panic the passengers. They, and the plane,

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could be disposed of later. Why tell them their hopeless situation?

The long, long night began . . .

Shortly before dawn, Mac went forward. He had another idea, and this time he insisted. He whispered it to Tal when he returned. She paled, but said nothing.

With a waterproof sackful of smoke bombs and flares strapped on his back, Mac slipped from an exit.

It was easier than he'd expected. They couldn't, probably didn't dare, keep lights trained on the stranded plane. He let himself into warm, salt water and swam. Dim silhouettes were visible round him: sampans and unidentifiable objects. Once he found himself close to a guard boat. He took a great breath and swam past under water.

The bay opened out. He swam far enough out to sea to check that the only area that showed lights lay to the south. Then he swam north, above the bay, and came ashore panting. He hid in the thick undergrowth. It was getting light. He made sure he could watch the full reach of sea without being spotted.

About sunrise a seaplane came from the direction of the Chinese mainland and landed south of the bay. It bore a familiar red star. Time passed. Somewhere on shore he heard a heavy engine begin to pound. Diesel, he thought. By and by it was silent. Mac wiped away a burning fleece of mosquitoes with hands bloodied by their bites; the warm sea would stop that agony, but it would cut down his view.

When he saw the first ship, he wasn't sure. A destroyer, coming fast. Then a second. He thought they were American; he thought the Chinese had no such vessels. But he waited in frantic anxiety till they began to turn; to turn away, he believed, with a report of no plane, no débris, and no life-raft visible in that sector. Then he acted.

He went out on the stretch of sand at the jungle margin and rapidly set off his smoke signals, dropping one, running, dropping another. He fired the flares.

A motorboat with a red star roared seawards from the cove that hid the plane. Its crew started shooting as he set down the last smoke bomb.

He made for the water, dived fast and flat, swam under it as soon as there was depth enough. He surfaced only to gulp air. Three or four times, the buzz and smack of bullets came close, but missed. Once, grabbing air, he looked back. His fireworks were raising big smoke pillars above the beach. Then the boat, so swiftly closing on him, ceased fire, arched round, and headed back for the bay.

Mac knew why, even before he saw two destroyers coming in fast, white water exploding at their bows and davits swinging out. He swam slowly now, towards the mouth of the cove. His thoughts were on Talisman.

The Red seaplane must have brought in the expected officials. That had been an hour and a half ago? Two hours? Long

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enough to range the passengers on the bank and shoot them down. Long enough . . .

The first power boat in a convoy came into view from the destroyers. Mac touched bottom and waved. A Navy chief waved back. Motors slowed, arms hauled Mac from the sea. "They've got the plane in the cove." He pointed.

A commander with a fierce, taut face said, "Are the passengers and crew O.K.?"

"They were a couple of hours ago."

The officer nodded a command, and yelled to Mac as the motors roared again, "We're going to invade, on my orders."

The boats surged forward.

Mac had time to look at the fishing village. Thatched houses, mostly, but a few big buildings: canneries or warehouses. Then the boat made a turn into the bay. Chinese were visible now, running, yelling.

Mac was suddenly appalled: he was certain the aeroplane had been grounded dead ahead some two hundred yards. It wasn't there.

His eyes raked the shore frantically. Then he saw it, as did the helmsman, who instantly headed towards the shore. The plane had been hauled out of the water on ways used, probably, for the big fishing junks. That diesel engine he had heard pounding, Mac thought.

The small boat touched, nosed up on a muddy bank. A sailor sprang ashore with a line. Then Mac. Behind him, men poured out, rifles ready. Armed men had been ranged round the aeroplane, Chinese Red soldiers, but they began to thin, to vanish. No shot was fired.

A ladder leaned up to an open cabin door. Muddy water was still draining from the plane. Mac leapt to the ladder, and was almost inside when a squat, heavy-muscled, Chinese officer with a pistol appeared at the door.

Mac grabbed the man, lifted him bodily, hurled him to the ground below, and went in. A second and a third Chinese officer were scrambling out through a wing exit opposite. The plane was in pandemonium. And Tal wasn't in her seat.

Then he saw her in the tail end. He stopped.

People gaped at him: a formidable man, clad only in shorts; his red-brown hair sodden, eyes bloodshot, bare feet bleeding from unnoticed small cuts. Talisman was sitting in the tail section of the plane with three little children. She'd evidently made paper soldier hats for them, and had been reading from a children's book she still held. Reading, until chaos began. Now she was just keeping her arms round the children, protectively.

From outside came a thunder of engines starting, motorboats and jeeps. The Red soldiers roared down the village streets towards the interior of Hainan Island. Fast-landing American sailors made no attempt to halt that frantic departure. The engines of the Chinese seaplane suddenly roared.

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Mac had Tal in his arms by then.

She said, "The crew! Mac, the crew!"

He whirled, pushed through the aisle. Passengers were laughing, cheering, weeping. Mac hurried past. The commander, the chief, and several sailors were untying and ungagging Dave Porter and the others. Dave was free and trying to find his voice when the near-naked, dripping, company executive appeared.

"Nice going, Farley," he croaked.

"Did they get that—gadget?"

Dave's head shook slowly. "They came aboard, corralled the five of us here, and tied us. Afraid we might signal, or something. Then they hauled the plane out on these ways. I suppose they thought they could take their time to drain her and open the holds."

"Were they going to—?"

Porter was succinct, "They told everybody they would tow us out tonight . . . Take a look at those stacked boxes of dynamite."

Dave was running his eyes over the control panel. He turned to the commander, who was massaging his co-pilot's rope-raw arms. "I think we'd better use the dynamite to blow up the plane. It is too badly damaged to fly out, and we don't want it to fall into communist hands."

By this time the village was nearly deserted. Only children and old people remained—people who shrugged when questioned. And the commander decided, after communicating with his admiral, that their one prisoner—the one Mac had tackled and thrown overboard—should be released. Then the passengers with their belongings were happily escorted to U.S. destroyers, to be taken to Hong Kong.

Rooms on the high floors of the Peninsula Hotel in Kowloon overlook Victoria—the main city of Hong Kong on an island—and also the harbour, which is said to be one of the three most magnificent in the world. Mac unpacked and spread out the contents of his wet suitcases. He could hear Talisman's soft tread as she did the same in the room next to his.

Tal stopped presently, and stared at the sunlit harbour: ferry-boats, junks, and sampans winding their way past freighters at anchor, past a liner, past two American destroyers, and a cruiser.

Talisman was thinking a long deep thought; feeling it, rather—for there weren't words to express it properly. It had to do with the natures of men and women and the values in life, real and superficial. She was thinking of the way in which a man could lend courage to a woman. A man like Mac, in any ordeal, could have courage and give it, too. Even, she reflected, in a woman's time of bearing a child.

She smiled a little and picked up the telephone.

It was silent in Mac's room next to hers. She didn't knock, but quietly unlocked the door. Mac was sitting on the edge of a divan, staring at something he'd just unpacked: a beautiful, carved jade vase. He held it delicately, appreciatively, and looked up, startled.

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Tal asked, "Where did you find that?"

"Bangkok." He held it up. "Like it?"

"Why, Mac, it's gorgeous! But I never knew you buy anything of that sort before."

"I never did," he answered. He walked to the window. "Tal," he went on, "I've learnt a lot on this trip about the way all people strive for beauty. Never had much time to think of it before. It is valuable. I could never understand your feelings about mere objects—like this. I do now, a little. Beauty's a symbol."

"There are things," she answered, "I understand about you that I didn't before. I was selfish, spoilt. You saved me from being a terrible coward . . ."

"You were all right, Tal. Pacifying those kids when you knew you were all going to be written off."

"I also found out—" she went on hesitantly.

But Mac's phone rang. He said, "Why, yes. Hullo, Admiral." Then he listened a long time. His "Good-bye, sir," was quiet. He averted his eyes, and his face was creased with emotion.

She guessed. "It was about Hartley St. John. They've found him, at last?"

"Tal, I'd rather not give you the details. He's O.K."

"Tell me," she said, and smiled faintly. "I know he wasn't responsible for getting those destroyers to where we were. So what happened?"

Mac told her briefly. "Our Navy knew the area would be crowded with Chinese sampans. So they put over a few sampans of their own with American sailors on board, disguised as fishermen. That way, they could do some searching right in the Chinese fishing fleet, unsuspected. One of those sampans found Hartley."

"Go on."

Mac looked unseeingly at the view. "Hartley thought the boat bearing down on his rubber raft was Chinese. So he tried to shoot himself. He missed. A wave probably threw him off balance. Afterwards, though, he raved, the admiral said. But you'll soon know this, too. Hartley wasn't CIA. He did go into OSS. On his first drop behind enemy lines, he . . . Well, most men lose their nerve, sometimes."

"So all those adventures of his were made up?"

Mac nodded dismally. "I am afraid so, Tal. I am sorry."

She crossed the room to his side. "I began to think so, long ago, Mac. The trip's changed a lot of my thinking. About Hartley, you, everything. And, of course, I knew Hartley was a coward before we ditched." She was smiling. "He saved that big lounge cushion to wrap himself in. Remember? But he had plenty of time to give it to somebody. Oh, Mac . . ."

Again she was interrupted. A knock, and Mac let in a uniformed coolie carrying a tray, two cocktail glasses, and a jug. "Wrong room," he said automatically.

"Right room," Talisman amended. "This is the nearest you can get, in China, to your famous daiquiris, Mac. I ordered them

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half an hour ago. I thought—" she picked up the jade vase again and looked at it—" Mac. We've both changed, haven't we? "

His eyes lighted, and he smiled his understanding. Then he shook his head as he poured the daiquiris. " I don't believe so, Tal. I think we've each discovered who and what the other really is! "

They touched glasses silently and drank. A Chinese breeze blowing from Hong Kong slammed the door shut between their rooms. Talisman crossed the room to open it.

" Not quite," she answered, turning back to Mac. " I learnt about myself through you. And for you, Mac, that door will never be closed again." As she spoke she wore a look so shining that Mac thought he had never seen so lovely a face.

He took her glass and set it down; then, encircling her with his arm, he gently led through the door a girl become a woman, a woman at last his wife.

★ ★ ★

ANNIE GET YOUR BRUSH

. . . Country-houses in the extreme south of Italy were exceptionally rare, but my father stayed in one that had been built for King Ferdinand the First and Fourth of the Two Sicilies. His host, a retired colonel, was most anxious to treat an English stranger well, and had determined to serve him an English breakfast, of which he had heard a good deal, and Henry had, in consequence, been obliged to carry up to his master's bedroom every morning at eight a tray on which were placed a bowl of octopus stewed in its own ink, a cup of black coffee and a glass of the fiery local brandy.

Henry would have to make up his bed, arranging the blankets in precisely the accustomed way, so that one or two could be pulled on or off very quickly as the mood took you, then he must sprinkle it lightly with Keating's, and proceed to hang up a mosquito-net by means of the special contrivance my father had invented—when younger, he had invented many other things; at Eton, for example, a musical toothbrush which played " Annie Laurie " as you brushed your teeth, and a small revolver for killing wasps. First Henry had to knock a great many nails into the wall, then from them he suspended the back of the net, and, finally, as though plumbing ocean depths, he must throw two cords with lead at the end over the side—out of the window, that is—and this would pull the whole airy contraption taut and into place . . . Of course, occasionally, a passer-by below would complain that he had been hurt, but one really could not pay attention to that sort of thing.

OSBERT SITWELL, *The Scarlet Tree*

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THE WHITE SLAVES

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

IT WAS a beautiful evening in late spring when Detective Inspector Patrick Petrella, coming early off duty with the idea of getting home, changing into a dinner jacket, and attending a concert, walked out of Gabriel Street and into an unusual fight.

Fights are not uncommon in Gabriel Street, but they rarely take place between prosperous-looking men in their late forties wearing dark suits and stiff collars and other such badges of respectability.

"Now then," said Petrella. "Stop it."

"Bloody thief."

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"Stop it," said Petrella. "Or I'll run you both in."

"Give him a lift, and he starts to call me names."

Petrella, who had by now inserted himself between the two contestants, spotted Constable Parrish rounding the corner and beckoned him up.

"If you'd like to come inside and tell me what it's all about?"

"Move along," said Constable Parrish to the crowd. "Move along there. Go along, you boys. Geddalong out of it."

"What are they hitting each other for, Mister?"

"Rehearsing for a film," said Constable Parrish. "Move along now."

"My name's Garstrang," said the stouter and redder of the two gentlemen. "I was driving in my car, just the other side of Blackheath, when this—" he swallowed hard—"gentleman stopped me. Said his own car had broken down, and he wanted a lift into London. Then, for no reason at all that I could see, he accused me of stealing his wireless set."

"I didn't say stealing. I said—"

"You certainly did—"

"We'll sort it out quicker," said Petrella, "if you talk one at a time. What is your name, sir?"

"My name's Pettiford. That's my card."

A quick glance showed Petrella that he was dealing with a Chartered Surveyor who lived in Blackheath and worked in Holborn. "All I said was that by some curious chain of circumstances this—this gentleman—had somehow acquired the car radio that was in my car when it was stolen three months ago."

"The radio was stolen, or the car?"

"The car. And it was a built-in set. That's what made it so odd."

"And you're quite certain—"

"I'm a professional man," said Mr. Pettiford. "And I'm not in the habit of making statements without reflection. It's a Penruddock four-valve miniature set—"

"Commonest set in the car world."

"Please, Mr. Garstrang."

"As I was saying, Inspector. It's a Penruddock miniature, but, as you will see if you look at it, the main tuning knob has been replaced by a much older, brown knob. That's how I spotted it was mine. The original—which was white, incidentally, like the rest of the set—fell off, and I lost it, but luckily I had this spare knob off an old Parker set, and it happened to fit, so I put it on. The knob's got Parker printed on it *and* a crack right across it. I mentioned this to this gentleman, and he stopped his car, and addressed me in the most offensive way—"

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"Wouldn't you be offensive if you were accused of being a thief?"

"I never—"

"Now, now," said Petrella. "Suppose we go and look at the set."

The brown Parker knob was there all right; and the crack.

"Doesn't prove a thing," said Mr. Garstrang. "He's sitting in the car. He can see the knob. What's to prevent him making the whole thing up?"

"I can't see why he would do that," said Petrella, who was beginning to be tired of Mr. Garstrang.

"Precisely," said Mr. Pettiford. "And let me tell you something else. These car radios all carry serial numbers, and when I had to send the set to be mended, I jotted down the number which, as it happens, I have here with me."

He opened a small, leather-bound volume at the page which most diaries have but so few people use, headed *Useful Personal Data*. "PRL 390652," said Mr. Pettiford. "And that's stamped on the *back* of the set. You can see it if you get your head right down, but you'll need a torch and a mirror."

"All right," said Mr. Garstrang grudgingly. "I'm not saying you mayn't be right. I'm just saying I didn't steal it."

"I never said—"

"Let's take down the particulars," said Petrella. By the time all the necessary information about motor car GXW 2606 and its radio set and its owner had been committed to paper, Petrella was no longer early off duty. He was very late.

He had recently come to the conclusion that his job demanded quarters of his own, and had been lucky enough, through the kind offices of a friend, to get hold of a couple of rooms in Brinkman Road. Their only drawback was that they were a full thirty minutes by bus from Gabriel Street. When he was in a hurry, Petrella had got into the habit of falling back on Bernard.

Bernard—and whether this was his Christian name or his surname no one had ever discovered—drove a radio cab, and normally parked at the end of Gabriel Street. He drove very fast and talked the whole time. And, since much of what he said was about X Division and its unruly inhabitants, Petrella rarely failed to listen with at least half his attention.

"Saw those two geezers fighting," said Bernard, as he swung into the New Kent Road across the bows of a brewers' dray. "Laugh! They'd as much idea of fighting as my kid sister. Less, reely. What was it all about?"

Petrella told him, with suitable omissions.

"Someone been pulling a fast one, I wooden be surprised,"

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said Bernard. " Those hot car boys, they're up to all the tricks. Did I tell you what happened to a friend of mine last week? Commercial traveller, name of White. Always had a smart car—this year's model or last—*and* an eye for the girls. You know what they say about commercial travellers? Well, double it, and that's old Chalky.

" Anyway—sooicidal the way some people walk across the road without looking, innit?—anyway, Chalky's driving along when a girl, a real smasher, jerks her thumb at him. He brakes so quick he nearly swallows his teeth. This girl asks him where he's going. ' Same place you are,' says Chalky smartly. Well, to cut a long story short, Chalky tells her where he's going, and she says, ' That'll do me fine. I can get a bus from there.'

" So they get along very nice together, and Chalky tells her his life story, and when they get to where it is he's going, he's quite sorry to put her down. He thinks, it isn't every day you pick up a dish like that. In fact, he's pretty pleased with himself altogether, and he does the job he's got to do and comes out, and blimey— "

Bernard paused, not so much because he had reached the climax of his story, as on account of a school of cyclists who needed his undivided attention.

" When he came back, the car was gone! He hadden been away more than ten minutes. And he'd locked all the doors. Of course, he got on to the police, and—do you know what?—they reckoned that girl had worked the whole thing. Soon as he was clear, she'd got on the blower and whistled up some of her boy friends. And not only that. While he was talking to her, she'd opened the offside window half an inch. Just enough for them to get a wire loop in and lift the door catch. Crafty. Here we are. Didden take too long, did it? "

By bolting his meal Petrella made the concert, and when he finally got home that night it was near to midnight. Pushed under his door he found a note from Mr. Wetherall, the schoolmaster who owned the flat above him. *Sergeant Shoesmith rang while you were out. He said it wasn't urgent. He thought it could wait till the morning.*

Petrella thought so, too. He went to bed and slept dreamlessly.

Gabriel Street had recently had two accessions to its detective strength. Detective Sergeant Shoesmith, who had come as a replacement for Sergeant Croft, was an exceedingly conscientious and well-informed officer. He never seemed actually to catch criminals, but his grasp of procedure was astonishing, and his paperwork was a model of what paperwork should be. Detective

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Wilmot, who had come down from Petrella's old station at Highside, looked, and sometimes behaved, like a Teddy boy, but managed to make a surprising number of arrests.

When Petrella reached his office on the following morning he found both of them interviewing a distracted Mrs. Ferrari.

" It's the lady I telephoned about last night, sir," said Sergeant Shoesmith. " She's lost her daughter."

" My Ruby," said Mrs. Ferrari. " I've been telling the gentleman. I haven't been able to sleep since it happened."

" Perhaps if we went into my room," said Petrella.

It took about ten minutes to extract the details. Ruby Ferrari, whose photograph her mother produced, was certainly a striking girl, with her mother's dark hair, a flashing eye, and plenty of evidence of character in her young face. She was twenty-two, and had left home three weeks earlier to stay with relations in North London.

After a few days with them, she had told them that she was returning home, with the result that, for more than a fortnight Mrs. Ferrari had imagined she was with the relations—" Ruby was never much of a one for writing "—and the relations had imagined she was with her mother. This state of affairs had lasted until the previous evening, when Mrs. Ferrari had seen her daughter in the back of a car, sweeping down the Commercial Road.

Mrs. Ferrari had waved, run after the car, and when it was halted in a traffic block, had nearly caught it up. But her daughter had taken no notice of her at all.

" Drugged," said Mrs. Ferrari.

" I beg your pardon," said Petrella.

" Drugged and helpless. Poor girl, poor girl."

" Have you any reason to suspect that she was in the car against her will? "

" I'm telling you," said Mrs. Ferrari. " She's been kidnapped, and drugged. And not the first nor the last."

" There doesn't seem to be a great deal of evidence— "

" Evidence! When she wouldn't even look at her own mother! And the man with her. I know the type. A nasty great brute with black hair— "

Petrella made a lot of notes, and eventually got rid of Mrs. Ferrari. He could think of a number of reasons why a high-spirited girl of twenty-two might want to get away from home, and none of them came within the province of Criminal Investigation. He had other and more immediately pressing matters on his mind.

He said to Sergeant Shoesmith, " I'm not at all happy about

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that car radio. That man Garstrang looked all right. And if he'd been a crook himself, he'd hardly have called attention to himself by starting a fight outside a police station. But his car may have a record, even if he hasn't. Give it a proper going over—engine number and chassis number and maker's record and so on. Central would lend you an experimental officer, if you asked."

"During my training," said Sergeant Shoesmith, "I attended a course on motor car identification at the Forensic Science Laboratory. I do not imagine that I shall need any assistance."

"Fine," said Petrella. "The sooner the better, then. And ask Wilmot to step in, would you?"

To Wilmot he said, "I've been thinking about this stolen car racket. One way to get on to it might be the distribution side. It's no good stealing cars unless you can sell them. How do you suppose they find their customers?"

Wilmot reflected, his urchin face thoughtful. "I'd say they get bought and sold in pubs and places like that."

"Bought for a quick resale?"

"Yes. Change hands five or six times. Each one makes a bit, and last thing, some real mug like Garstrang gets loaded with it."

"I'm not sure," said Petrella. "Old cars, yes. The sort of job you see on street corner lots. I'm not really thinking of them. I had in mind a high price car, a bargain, nearly new, owner going abroad—that sort of thing."

"You see adverts in the newspapers," said Wilmot. "Be a bit risky, or—I'll tell you what—there's shops advertise bargains. Have a board with postcards pinned on. They're not too fussy what they take—"

"That's an idea," said Petrella. "Scout round and keep your eyes open."

Sergeant Shoesmith rendered an interim report some days later. "I think we may be on to something," he said. "It's a most curious car. It appears, on the face of it, to be a last year's model. Application for registration was made at the Mid-Kent local taxation office in February of this year, and the engine and chassis numbers given correspond to those on the machine. However—" Sergeant Shoesmith cleared his throat. Petrella could easily imagine him lecturing to attentive students.

"However, an inquiry at the works where the car was made has shown that the car bearing that particular engine number was shipped to Brazil, while the car bearing that chassis number—a different car—was sent to New Zealand."

"Odd," agreed Petrella.

"I therefore made a further inspection of GXW 2606, and

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noted in particular the body number, the maker's casting number on the gearbox, the rear axle number, and the part numbers on the springs."

"*Do* springs have numbers?"

"Certainly. Separate serial numbers on both the front and the rear springs. I referred to the manufacturers, who produced their works records. They showed that the springs and axle numbers came from one machine, the gearbox from another, and neither of them corresponded to the body number."

"I see," said Petrella. He tried to straighten it out in his mind. "If the works records are right—and I expect they are—it looks as if the engine and chassis numbers are phoney. They were probably put on with a hand stamp. The laboratory might be able to help there. And we ought to check on garages and workshops and that sort of thing. You can't take half a dozen cars to pieces, and mix them up again, in your own back yard."

Wilmot, when he put in an appearance after lunch, said he'd found something which might be what they wanted. There was a newsagent in Cable Street, called Fitch. Mr. Fitch had been intermittently under suspicion of being a receiver of stolen goods, but nothing proved. He was currently advertising two motorcycles and a car for sale. The car was a Purvis ten, last year's model, Army officer, ordered abroad. Cash price, for a quick sale, eight hundred pounds.

"You'd better go and buy it," said Petrella.

He looked doubtfully at Wilmot, who looked doubtfully back at him. Wilmot, with a minimum change of clothing, would have looked completely in place in any public bar, dance hall, or south London café, but he did not strike the eye as the probable purchaser of eight-hundred-pounds-worth of motor car.

"Put your best suit on," said Petrella. And then, with a fearful prevision of what Wilmot's best suit would look like, "No. Your second-best suit. Do you know anything about cars?"

"Not really. What'll I use for money?"

"You needn't go as far as that. All we want to do is get a look at the car, and the man who's selling it. And find where he keeps it."

Wilmot slouched off, grinning; and Petrella had just settled down to a serious consideration of Sergeant Shoesmith's report on GXW 2606 when Superintendent Benjamin arrived.

To him Petrella outlined his ideas. "It's a new sort of market, really," he said. "If you just knock off any old car, and give it a repaint, and a new number plate, and buy a phoney log book and fake the entries to fit, well—everyone knows it's a hot car. You might get fifty quid. A hundred if you're lucky.

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" But these boys aren't interested in that sort of money. They start from scratch. They take nothing but new cars. And they mix 'em up till their own makers wouldn't know them. Then they apply for registration number, log book, and all, and they can sell it for proper money. To smart alecs like Garstrang, who'll always buy from a little man round the corner if they can save themselves a couple of hundred pounds on the list price."

Benjamin listened to this in silence. Then he said, " It's not impossible. You'd need a regular supply of the right sort of car. And somewhere to work." He spoke almost absently. Petrella gathered that he had something more important than cars on his mind. " Have you been having any trouble with girls round here? "

" Girls, sir? "

" Unexplained disappearances. That sort of thing."

" We did have one case," said Petrella slowly. " If you could call it a case. It didn't seem to me to amount to much." He told Benjamin about Mrs. Ferrari, and her daughter, Ruby. " My own view was that she'd cut adrift. She was twenty-two. I'm afraid I didn't—is there something up? "

" I don't know," said Benjamin. " When people talk about white slave traffic and that sort of thing I look for a more ordinary explanation. Nine cases out of ten, I agree with you, you find the girl's got tired of her family and walked out on them. But—we've had some most extraordinary reports."

" Which girls are missing, sir? "

" That's just it," said Benjamin. " I don't know."

Petrella stared at him.

" It's quite mad," agreed Benjamin. " All the reports are of an organisation that's kidnapping girls. They shadow them in cars. Several cars. They use radio for that part of it. Then, when the girl's on her own, and there are no witnesses, they pick them up. And take them to a place on the river—and drug them—and ship them abroad. Go on. Laugh. I did when I first heard about it."

But Petrella didn't feel like laughing. Already, in the few months he had been at Gabriel Street, he had experienced too many odd things to disbelieve anything merely because it sounded fantastic. " But you say there aren't any girls missing—"

" I didn't say that at all," said Benjamin. " There are lots of girls missing. There always are. People like your Miss—what's her name?—Ferrari. And boys, too. And men, and women. And most of them will turn up again. What I said was, we haven't been able to connect any actual missing girl with this—this organisation."

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" I see," said Petrella.

" The mothers are getting worried. They're a pretty level-headed crowd down in this part of London, but when a panic does start, it takes a bit of stopping. It's not out of hand yet, but I could see it getting that way."

Petrella knew that Superintendent Benjamin was not given to exaggeration. If he said that a situation might get out of hand, then he meant exactly that. He was further depressed when Wilmot got back with a report of failure.

" I don't know what it was," he said, stroking his tie, a red satin one tastefully patterned with silver horseshoes, " but it didn't go at all."

" Tell me what happened."

" Ol' Fitch said he could fix it for me to see the man who was selling the car. He said he'd have to get him on the blower—he was a business man, always on the move— "

" I'm not surprised," said Petrella. " Did you get any idea of the number? "

" Not a sausage. He went in the back part of the shop, and shut the door. Few minutes later he came out and said I was to meet this man in ten minutes' time at the south end of Berry Street—which, as I'd come on foot, I could just about do if I shifted, an' no more."

" That was the idea, I expect," said Petrella. " They wouldn't want to give you time to fix a reception committee. They were probably watching you all the way. If you'd stopped off in a call box—no one would have turned up."

" That's what I thought. So I just went along quiet. Few minutes later, a car stopped about twenty yards from where I was standing, and a man looked out. He seemed to be interested in me, so I started walking towards him. When I got about five yards away, the car drove off. And that was that. I waited around a bit, but nothing happened, so I came home."

" It was a good idea, but we botched it," said Petrella. " We ought to have got someone from another division altogether. Someone a lot older and more—well, more like someone in the market for an eight-hundred-pound spot-cash deal in motor cars. I'm afraid he recognised you."

" Well, I got a good look at him, too. Dark hair, a bit greasy, and a big nose— "

" Hmp," said Petrella. The description rang a faint bell. " Keep your eyes open for him. I've a feeling there's trouble coming."

The next few days were quiet enough on the surface, but there was a ground-swell of uneasiness. Everyone seemed to be waiting

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for something to happen and expecting the worst. Telephone calls to the Duty Sergeant about missing and errant children increased. Most of them, as usual, led to nothing.

The only glimmer of a line was produced by Wilmot, who thought he saw the dark-haired man driving a car which was held up by the traffic lights. Wilmot, on his bicycle, followed craftily, finally losing him on a straight stretch in Commercial Road.

"Turned down one of those streets towards the river," he said. "It just occurred to me to wonder—"

"All right," said Petrella patiently. "Let's have it."

"If they are taking these girls away by boat—"

"I'll believe in the white slave traffic," said Petrella crossly, "when I, myself, personally, see a girl being abducted, and not a moment before."

He was feeling the lack of reliable contacts. In his old Division there would have been half a dozen people he could have gone to, but a grapevine was the slow produce of time and confidence. It could not be constructed in a hurry. Then he had an inspiration.

"Why, certainly I know about it," said Bernard. "Who doesn't? I've heard 'em talking."

"You've *what*?"

"That's right. It's wunnerful what you can pick up on these short-wave sets. Get on the police car net any time you like. I've heard 'em talking about *you* sometimes."

"Do you mean to say that this gang's got a wavelength of its own?"

"That's right. They don't use it regular, of course, and they swop about a bit—but I've picked 'em up once or twice. And so have some of my mates; I'm telling you, it's not the sort of stuff I like to listen to."

"What do you mean?"

"The way they talk about these poor girls. Cold-blooded. I heard one of them say, 'Lovely little body. She'd just suit the chief.'"

"It's not true," said Petrella. "You're making it up."

"Certainly I'm not," said Bernard. "Lots of chaps have heard it. And they talk to their old ladies. It's got 'em worried, and I'm not surprised. They're fiends in human form. They track a girl down—keep an eye on her for days an' days perhaps.

"One night I heard 'em say, 'She's fifty yards from the corner of Bridge Street. We might pick her up now,' and the other one says, 'No. There's a man on the other side of the road. Too dangerous.'"

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Suddenly Petrella threw back his head and laughed. A great light had dawned.

"You think I'm a liar," said Bernard.

"No, I don't," said Petrella. "I believe you absolutely. Do you think you could manage to cut me in on one of these conversations?"

"They're not what you'd call at all regular," said Bernard. "But I'll do my best. I've got daughters of my own. Here we are."

As Petrella went up the stairs he heard a telephone ringing ahead of him, and guessed it was his.

"I think you'd better come down if you can, sir," said the voice of Sergeant Shoesmith in carefully modulated tones. "We're having a bit of trouble."

Petrella flagged a taxi, whose ancient driver was unfortunately not Bernard, and arrived at Gabriel Street twenty-two minutes later. In the outer room he had to push through a crowd of some eight or ten women, being kept at bay by Station Sergeant Oldham; and in his own office he found Mr. and Mrs. Ferrari.

"This is Inspector Petrella," said Sergeant Shoesmith, in tones of undisguised relief.

"Him I have met," said Mrs. Ferrari. "But will he restore to me my Baby?"

"Her baby?"

"That's her younger daughter, sir."

"Seventeen years old this month," said Mr. Ferrari.

"If you'd explain—"

"Again and again," said Mrs. Ferrari. "Talk and talk, explain and explain. Talk does not bring my Baby back to me. Where is she now? What are they doing to her?"

At another time there might have been a comic element in the frenzy of Mrs. Ferrari, but at the moment, as the tears rolled down her cheeks and she seized, in her blind distraction, first upon her husband, then upon Sergeant Shoesmith, Petrella felt not the slightest desire to laugh.

"Please," he said. And to Sergeant Shoesmith. "If she's already explained it to you, you tell me."

"Her daughter went out shopping this afternoon. She hadn't come back by tea-time and her mother started worrying—well, they're all worried down there, now, if their daughters are out of sight. Then, about an hour ago it must have been, a man rang up. He didn't give any name. He just said they weren't to worry. Baby was with Ruby. And rang off."

"I see," said Petrella.

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In the ordinary way it mightn't have been too bad, but against the background of mounting panic and hysteria, almost anything might happen. He had opened his mouth, but with no very clear idea of what to say, when there was an interruption. He had been vaguely aware of a disturbance outside.

Now Sergeant Oldham looked round the door and said, "Excuse me interrupting you, sir, but there's a man—" and before he could finish, Bernard was in the room.

"If you're quick," he said, "you can hear 'em yourself."

Petrella said to Sergeant Shoesmith, "Look after Mrs. Ferrari. Tell her I expect everything will be all right," and he darted from the room.

There must have been some sort of emergency call, for he saw Detective Wilmot and Sergeant Perry pushing through the crowd, and had time to say, "Get out a car. You can drive, Perry. Wilmot, get on the set. I'm going in this man's taxi. And you mustn't lose sight of me."

"Don't worry about that, sir," said Perry, who had driven for the Flying Squad.

Petrella caught a glint in Bernard's eye and said, "Well, watch it."

The next minute he was in the cab. The small, bulb-shaped loud speaker was giving out static, against a background of morse.

"Lot of ships on this wavelength," said Bernard. "They'll come on in a minute."

Then Petrella heard it, a man's voice, speaking quietly but clearly.

"Don't crowd her. Give her a hundred yards. We don't want to lose this one." Pause. Then, "She's turning down Lofthouse Street."

A second voice, sharper and higher, said "Nice body. Bit heavier at the back. She's just what you're looking for, isn't she?"

"Can't wait to see her stripped," said the first voice.

"Fiends," said Bernard.

"I'm going to pull in at the top of the Square. If she goes any farther, you pick her up, and I'll fade out."

"All right," said Petrella. "Lofthouse Street, and don't waste any time."

"Here we go," said Bernard. He turned in his own length, rocketed past Perry's car, which was still facing the wrong way, and came out at the end of Gabriel Street like a bolted cat. Clinging desperately to the seat, Petrella saw that the police car had managed to turn and was coming after them. They went down the middle of the High Street like a fire engine on the way to a

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blaze, jinked into Balaam Street to avoid the jam at the cross-roads, and out again into the High Street fifty yards lower down.

For sixty seconds it was clear running, then they saw the block ahead. Hardly slowing, Bernard swung in a U turn, went back twenty yards, shot down a side street, crossed two intersections so fast that Petrella had scarcely time to blink, and was in a sort of back alley, running alongside the railway.

"Can't we get through here?" said Petrella.

"Just," said Bernard. He went through a space between a lamp post and a wall that had never been meant to admit a car, turned left and right, and was back in the High Street again.

"Lofthouse is second left," said Bernard. "Do you want to go straight down it?"

The wireless answered him.

"Sorry," said the voice. "She's not stopping. Oh yes, she is. Far end of the Square."

"That'll be Halifax Square," said Bernard. "Go straight on, we can cut in the far end."

"Fine," said Petrella. He reflected that there were advantages in operating from a taxi. "When we get in sight of the Square, just draw up and stop."

Halifax Square is a relic, a quadrilateral of once stately houses, now much depressed; in the middle of it, a wired-off area of black and almost leafless trees. There are six roads into it, two at each side, and one at each end. Petrella came in from the west. The near side of the Square was deserted. The far side was blocked by bushes. In the sudden silence he could hear a car turning in at the north end, changing gear, and slowing.

He said to Bernard, "I'm going across to have a look. Keep an eye on me. If I wave, come round the Square towards me. Drive quite slowly, as if you were looking for a fare."

"All right," said Bernard.

"And while you're waiting, see if you can pick up Sergeant Perry and tell him where we are."

"I thought he said he could drive," said Bernard. But Petrella was already climbing the fence. Dusk was falling. He crossed a strip of yellowing grass, and pushed cautiously through the jungle of elder bushes ahead of him.

On the east side of the Square two cars were parked, ten yards apart. The first one was a new Ford Consul. The one behind, a battered but fast-looking Riley Saloon. Two men were working at the far-side door of the Consul.

As Petrella raised his head to get a better look, there was a click, and the door swung open. Then a lot happened quickly.

One man jumped into the Consul. The other ran back to the

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Riley, and both cars were on the move. Petrella must have signalled without being conscious of it, because Bernard was already coming round the Square in the opposite direction.

There was no time to say much. As Petrella climbed the railing, Bernard executed one of his pinpoint turns, and the chase was on.

"Did you get Perry?" said Petrella.

"We're on his net now," said Bernard. "Left here, I think, don't you?"

"Proceeding west, along Broad Street," said Petrella, and heard Wilmot acknowledge.

"Got an idea they're making for the river," said Bernard. "We'll soon know. That's right. I thought so. Left turn here." As they went round, Petrella saw the police car had fallen in behind. It was difficult to be certain, but he thought that Sergeant Perry looked a little put out.

Now they were running between echoing warehouses.

"No need to crowd 'em," said Bernard. "There's only the one way they can go now. Smell the river?"

When they came out into Ropewalk Street it was empty under its lamps as far as the eye could see.

"It'll be one of these turnings," said Bernard. "They're all dead ends. Boatyards and jetties."

"Pull up," said Petrella. The police car drew in quietly behind them, and Wilmot tumbled out.

"Remember I told you, sir?" he said. "When I lost that man, it was just about here."

"It's one of these three," said Petrella. "We'll search them in turn. You come along too, Perry. Bernard can watch both cars."

"What are we looking for?" said Wilmot.

"A boatyard," said Petrella, "with an entrance big enough to let a car in."

"Is that where they keep the girls?"

"That's right," said Petrella. "You'll find all the missing girls there. In various states of undress."

They found the Riley. It was parked outside a double gate on which they could read the words CONVEX BOATBUILDING COMPANY and underneath, *Strictly Private*. There were spikes on top of the gate.

Petrella said to Sergeant Perry, "Go back and whistle up some reinforcements. I don't want to let this little lot slip." Sergeant Perry looked, for a moment, as if he was going to argue, then turned and doubled away.

"I could get over that gate," said Wilmot. He reached up

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cautiously, felt for a grip between the spikes, put a toe on the handle of the wicket gate, and pulled himself up. As he did so, his foot slipped, he gave the wicket gate a sharp kick, and it flew open.

"Easier than climbing," said Petrella. They went through, and found themselves in a yard, dimly lit by an overhead lamp, and littered with the débris of a workshop. Through the middle of it, clear in the mud, fresh tyre marks ran to a building at the far end.

There were lights in the building; and voices.

"Are the girls in there?" said Wilmot.

"That's right," said Petrella.

They tiptoed forward.

The workshop door swung open under his hand, and he stepped in, closely followed by Wilmot.

Four people looked up.

Two men both dressed in oily denims; the first and nearest to them a big, thick-set, black-haired man with a lot of nose and chin; the other, small, sandy-haired, and with the look of a jockey. Behind them a striking, black-haired girl, also in overalls. Petrella recognised her from a once-seen photograph as Ruby Ferrari. She was holding an inspection lamp. Behind her a smaller, fair-haired girl. He guessed she would be Baby.

The car they were working on was the new Ford Consul.

"And just who are you?" said the black-haired man.

"I'm an Inspector of Police," said Petrella, "and I have reason to believe that the car you have here was recently stolen."

"Fix him, Pete," said the older girl.

"I must warn you—" said Petrella. This was as far as he got. The girl threw the inspection lamp at him and, as he ducked, the black-haired man swung hard. Petrella put his foot in a pool of oil and sat down.

As a counter, this proved an effective move. The blow missed by a yard, and before the big man had got back on balance, Wilmot had hit him, and Wilmot was a boxer.

The black-haired man went over backwards and cracked his head on the hub cap of the car. At this point reinforcements started to arrive.

"You mean to tell me," said Superintendent Benjamin, some days later, "that all that business on the wireless was motor cars, not girls?"

"It was aimed at stealing cars, not girls," said Petrella. "A girl was involved. She helped to steal the cars."

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He told the Superintendent the story of Bernard's commercial traveller friend, Mr. White.

"I see," said Benjamin. "They used a girl to locate the cars, and open them up for them."

"That's right, sir. Ruby was in it up to her neck. Appears she had fallen for Cross. No accounting for taste, is there?"

"And what about the younger girl? Are we going to have to charge her?"

"It might be possible to leave her out," said Petrella. "She was under her sister's thumb, I think. Ruby had been trying to persuade her to join for weeks, but she'd only just got her there."

"Leave her out if you can," said Benjamin. "We don't want to get the thing more complicated than we have to."

"I'm afraid it's pretty complicated already," said Petrella. "She's fallen for Wilmot. When she saw him knock Cross down, it *did* something to her. Or so she told me."

"I'll leave you to sort that one out," said Benjamin hastily.

"Itchy-kitchy-koo."

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SKULL WITH OWL

There was a scowl on his fortunate face

BY GEORGE BRADSHAW

EDOUARD LORILLARD stretched lengthily back in his chair, his feet on his desk—the lean, fortunate figure of the gallery owner—and listened comfortably into the telephone. His eyes were fixed absently on his left hand, which fingered a frog, a polished, elegant, dark green frog made from a chunk of good Wyoming jade.

"I suppose you saw the papers," Audrey MacAllister's New York voice said.

"Um," Edouard Lorillard said.

"What did you think?"

"About what?"

"Malherbes," Audrey said, as if Malherbes had been the only name in the papers.

"Oh that," Edouard said, with just the right tone of bored disinterest. But he frowned, and his fingers closed tightly round the frog.

"Will it do you any good?"

"No," Edouard said. "I have only a couple of drawings and some of the early etchings."

"I have a painting. And I have just added five hundred dollars to the price, as you can imagine."

"I can imagine," Edouard said, and gripped the frog even tighter. "Well—"

"Ring me," Audrey said.

Edouard put down the telephone, took his feet from the desk, placed the frog upon it, then picked up a newspaper. There was a scowl on his fortunate face.

It was Audrey's sentence about Malherbes that had annoyed, even frightened him.

He had seen the story and had done no more than glance at it. Yet here it was, a dispatch from Paris, given almost a whole column of print—such importance that of course its news was spread in London and Stockholm and Zurich and San Francisco, as well as New York. And here was I, Edouard thought, uninterested. Why?

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The meat of the story was this: Maurice Malherbes had verified a rumour that had been going round Paris for a week that he had burnt seventy-eight of his paintings. On the eve of his eightieth birthday he had, he said, looked over his work and decided these seventy-eight canvases were second-rate, so he had stuffed them forthwith into the porcelain stove in his studio.

Edouard remembered the stove. It gave a lovely heat.

"I am a strong man," Malherbes was quoted as saying, "I can bang out a picture any time. But sometimes they are not what I expected."

Edouard saw the old man, one of the great of the School of Paris, sitting neatly dressed in a dark suit with a waistcoat and a collar and a tie, surrounded by his tables of paint, his bursts of brushes, and a squadron of unfinished canvases, declaiming imperiously about life and art . . . No one but Malherbes himself would ever have dared say he had painted a second-rate picture.

A few of the paintings that had been destroyed were listed. Most, of course, were unknown, since Malherbes had never let them out of his studio, but some of the seventy-eight had indeed got as far as exhibition. Edouard's eye ran down the list until it was stopped by number nine, *Skull with Owl.*

He looked up. He knew that picture. He had seen—but where?—a reproduction of it. He rose and walked to the cabinet in which he kept his books of reference.

Edouard's office at the back of his Lorillard Gallery displayed just that degree of disorder which was admirably suited to its artistic purpose. It was a handsome room, panelled in bleached fruit wood, with pale-yellow leather sofas, its tables littered with vases of tousled white tulips and the fascinating international jetsam of the art world—books, prints, catalogues, posters, pamphlets, portfolios. Edouard liked the disorder, its richness made him feel secure—and his mind was such that he knew where everything was. Even, as it happened, the reproduction of *Skull with Owl.*

After two false attempts, he pulled out a *Cahier d'Art* of 1937, and there, as he had remembered, was the picture.

It was impossible to believe the old man had burnt this. It was such a perfect, such a typical Malherbes—the red underpainting, the thin whites, the lavish blacks, the awkward, elegant drawing. He laid down the book, and walked to the window.

Yes, very well, but that was merely a distraction from the question: *why* had he not been as impressed by the story as Audrey MacAllister? Was it, possibly, that he was becoming too knowledgeable about the art business, that he had lost that amateur's enthusiasm which every good dealer should have?

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It was the number, seventy-eight, which had impressed the newspapers. And rightly. No museum in the world boasted seventy-eight Malherbes, probably none of the public had ever seen so many together anywhere; a dozen alone in a room, in all their gratuitous splendour, was show enough to satisfy anybody. So seventy-eight—

What the public did not understand was the fecundity, the facility of great painters. If I am not filled with a sense of wonder at everything that happens in the world of art, I am lost. In a business way, at least.

Edouard sat down at his desk again and pulled the Malherbes *Cahier* to him. Or am I bemoaning something quite different, he thought, am I bemoaning only the fact that Audrey MacAllister, the unprincipled owner of the MacAllister Galleries, thought faster than I did?

He began to study the Malherbes. For half an hour he absorbed everything he could about it—its date, size, colours, provenance, its reception in 1937, everything he could gain from the *Cahier*. Then, in the midst of a frown, he gave a start, as if something had occurred to him or something been made plain to him, and he raised his eyes and began to stare unseeingly into air. Ha, he thought, this will fix Miss Audrey MacAllister.

About a month later, on a clear evening, Edouard invited Audrey MacAllister to dinner. At a little after seven he arrived at her gallery carrying a wrapped package, which could only be, considering the circumstances, a picture.

He found her in her back room, sitting on a cinnamon silk sofa, reading a newspaper. It was a pretty room, with whitewashed brick walls, glass doors opening on to a garden, a large fireplace and, of course, pictures everywhere, stacked and hung.

If Audrey's blonde hair wasn't quite real, her face was. Lean and beautiful, like the rest of her, her face was relaxed and confident, a successful face.

She peered at Edouard over much-too-large glasses and, indicating the package, said, "For me?"

"No," Edouard said, and sat down in a favourite chair. "But something that will amuse you, I think."

"I suppose you want a drink."

Edouard nodded. "A martini. The good kind." He began to untie the string of the package.

Audrey MacAllister had several talents, and the making of martinis was not the least. She was fortunate in one respect: her father had left her several cases of prewar vermouth—pre-First War—so she had an advantage.

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Edouard took his first sip and closed his eyes. " This miracle," he said. " The first barman to be canonised will be you."

Audrey sat down again on her sofa. " I'll bet you say that to all the barmen," she said. " Now amuse me."

Edouard picked up a cigarette. " I have to give a short preamble," he said. " You remember a few weeks ago we talked about Malherbes? "

Audrey frowned.

" Yes," Edouard said, " the immolation—"

" Yes, yes. I remember."

" After I talked to you, I read the stories more carefully. And something occurred to me . . . You know I have been in Malherbes' studio not often, but several times."

Audrey nodded. " I went there once. So neat."

" Yes," Edouard said. " Then you remember the porcelain stove? "

" I do."

" The story in the paper said that it was in the porcelain stove that he burnt the pictures."

" Yes."

" Now, well, this stove. Its door is not over eighteen inches wide. It's not such a big stove."

" True."

" So. I don't know the size of the pictures he burnt. Perhaps they were small ones, most of them. But I do know this, they were not *all* small. The *Skull with Owl* is three feet by four."

Audrey said, " But . . ."

" I know. It would be quite possible to chop the pictures up or rip them, and then burn them. But, somehow, I don't see the old man doing that. He could cleanly sacrifice them by fire, yes; but he is not the type to rip or chop or tear. Do you think? "

" No. You're quite right."

" Anyway, I thought I'd find out. So I telephoned Paris, Jean Lombardy, and asked him to do some inquiring. And the day before yesterday—" now Edouard removed the brown paper from the package—" I was called down to the Customs Office and this was waiting for me."

With a flourish he produced the picture—*Skull with Owl*, by Maurice Malherbes.

Audrey leaned forward to look. There it stood, bright and perfect, except for one thing: on the upper left corner there was a burn, the canvas was singed and the paint discoloured.

" What may have happened," Edouard said, " was that the old man simply didn't realise that the picture wouldn't fit in the stove, or maybe he changed his mind, I don't know. We'll

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probably never know. Anyway, there it is, and a beauty."

Audrey leaned back, folded her arms, and nodded soberly. "Yes," she said, "yes."

Edouard smiled. "Amused?" he said.

"Yes, Edouard," Audrey said, and got up. "I am amused far beyond anything you could have hoped."

She went to a cupboard, opened it, took out a picture, and came back to Edouard and set her picture beside his.

They were identical; or almost identical, for where in Edouard's picture the burn was in the upper left-hand corner, in Audrey's it was in the lower right-hand corner.

Now Edouard leaned forward, and for a long moment stared at Audrey's picture. Then he straightened up and took a fresh cigarette. "How very unkind of you," he said, "to let me go through that elaborate story about the porcelain stove."

"But how very naughty of you, to think you could take me in," Audrey said. "Edouard, dear Edouard, I thought we were better friends than that. Not to speak of our agreement about forgeries."

"Don't use that word," Edouard said, looking apprehensively at the walls. "But for that matter, what about your picture?"

"I intended to show it to you. But later. I didn't want to spoil your dinner."

Edouard lay back in his chair and stretched. "I suppose if I feel anything, it's sheepish."

"Good," Audrey said, "I'll make you another drink. After that I think I'm going to laugh for quite a long time. Then we can get down to business."

The amiable relationship of Edouard Lorillard and Audrey MacAllister was based on a policy of mutual distrust. With only a few minor underhand lapses, it had worked now for over two years, perhaps because it was pursued on both sides with an interest that showed something beyond mere double-entry book-keeping. It had begun, of course, in guile, but not directly; in roundabout, coincidental guile, all fostered by the momentary touch of a wild, unlikely artist named Ben Howard.

One day Edouard had been walking on Third Avenue when he passed a junk-antique shop in whose window was a number of pictures. Edouard was not of an innocence to believe you could pick up bargains or masterpieces on Third Avenue any longer, but he stopped; they were pictures.

And almost immediately he spotted a painting that excited him. Inside the shop, with his usual innate caution, he assumed a kind of bored interest; but after a few minutes, realising he was

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not impressing the dealer, he agreed to buy the canvas for sixty dollars. He wrote out a cheque and ten minutes later found himself in his own gallery unwrapping his purchase.

There it took him no time at all to persuade himself that he had actually found what he hoped he had found.

The painting was of a bunch of small flowers tied with a cord, below which were several sketches, uncoloured, of leaves and petals. Of background there was none—the thin fine canvas had been left untouched, and now with age had turned a deep tan. But the strength of the drawing and the characteristic laying-on of the colours—the loved reds and caressed blues—showed the picture to be just what it proclaimed itself—an unfinished sketch by Pierre Auguste Renoir.

This sort of thing had never happened to Edouard before. He had the picture framed impressively, hung it in the foyer of his gallery under a flattering light, and waited to see what would happen.

What happened was Ben Howard. Edouard first saw him one dreary afternoon standing absorbed in front of the Renoir, a slight, agile figure in an old raincoat, with the round, gaunt face of an actor or perhaps a dancer, and black curling hair which had been combed only with his hands.

When he became aware of Edouard he asked, " How much is this, can you tell me? "

Edouard said, " Eight thousand five hundred."

At that an odd thing happened to Ben Howard's face. From the forehead to the chin it lighted up in a most surprised and delightful smile. " Eighty-five hundred? " he said, unbelieving.

" Yes," Edouard confirmed. " Nice, isn't it? "

" Could I—" Ben Howard hesitated. " Could we talk somewhere privately? "

Edouard could only agree. " Yes. Back here," he said, and led the way to his office.

Ben Howard made no preliminary feints. " The last time I saw that picture," he said, " it did not—"

Edouard interrupted him, " Oh. You know it? "

" Yes. It was I who left it at the shop on Third Avenue. To be sold on commission."

" I see," Edouard said.

" I have just come from there. The man said you paid him forty dollars. I have my share in my pocket. Twenty-four dollars."

" The man lied," Edouard said. " I paid him sixty."

" I'm not surprised," Ben Howard said. " Still, from your point of view, it was a bargain."

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" I think so."

" Would you be interested in other bargains?"

" Possibly."

Ben Howard smiled a shy and perhaps depreciatory smile. " What I started to say," he said, " was that the last time I saw the picture, it did not have those initials on it. The A. R., I mean. They stand for Auguste Renoir, I suppose?"

" I suppose so," Edouard said. " Great artists are sometimes careless about signing pictures. But a buyer wants to be sure of what he is getting. Perhaps I should say *she*. Women particularly like labels. They trust them."

Ben Howard nodded. " I understand. Well." He turned abruptly and started for the door. " I'll be back. What is the best time?"

" The morning," Edouard said.

" The morning," Ben Howard repeated. And then, turning again, he opened his eyes wide, and in a falsetto whisper said, " Eighty-five hundred!"

Edouard was warned.

Ben Howard returned two days later, and he returned after that again and again. His facility, Edouard discovered, was astounding. An elegant water-colour of Juan Gris came from his hand in the same week as a swirl and wiggle of Kandinsky. What was more, he was clever to the point of wisdom. He painted no masterpieces. " A masterpiece," he once said, " should be left to the artist himself. I content myself with the sketch, the unfinished page, the association piece. At current prices, let's face it, they're enough."

So began for Edouard and Ben Howard a period of collaboration that was successful. Into the loving hands and on to the expensive walls of many happy people in Florida and Arkansas and Oregon went the sinister trifles of the pair.

But the period actually was short. Most men of Ben Howard's breed, copying or contriving after the masters, lack not only the genius, but also the greed of the creators. Not so Ben Howard. He began to demand from Edouard prices and advances so astronomical that an end was inevitable; so came shouts and curses and recriminations, and a break that was permanent.

It was at this point that Audrey MacAllister and Edouard suddenly came closely together. He had known her, but only casually, for several years. It was his habit, once or twice a week, to walk round a dozen other galleries to see what was going on in town.

On a particular late afternoon he was standing in her gallery

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when he saw—from a position where he could not be seen—Ben Howard come storming out of Audrey's office and make straight for the door. A moment later Audrey herself, frowning and obviously upset, had emerged and looked round to be sure, possibly, that he had really gone.

A dozen ideas crossed Edouard's mind at that moment, but he acted on impulse. He walked over to Audrey and said, "I think I know you well enough to ask you to have dinner with me. What do you say?"

Without changing expression, Audrey said, "I'd love it."

That dinner, whatever of kindness or cupidity had motivated it, was the beginning of the affaire de guerre of Edouard and Audrey.

And it was she, to Edouard's surprise, who set the tone of the evening. "I sometimes wish," she said over soup, "I could have lived in the Middle Ages."

"Whatever for?" Edouard inquired.

"Because dealers in rare objects had it so much easier then. What everyone wanted in those days was saints' bones and bits of the true cross, and the supply easily outran the demand."

"Is this true?"

"Yes. I know about these things. There were enough bits of the true cross scattered around Christendom to build a barn."

"My dear, we would have been in luck."

Audrey nodded. "Whereas now," she said, "I have a customer in Omaha absolutely pining for a Monet—at a price—to hang in her dining-room."

Edouard frowned. "Have you seen the new Monet at the Modern? The one that's fourteen feet by seven—more the dimensions of a room than a picture really . . . Let me see. I wonder if I have a Monet you could use?"

Audrey laughed. "Never mind. As a matter of fact I was offered one today by a friend of yours, Ben Howard. Outrageous man."

Edouard raised his brows, astonished.

"A friend of *mine*?"

Audrey looked insolently into Edouard's eyes.

"Come off it," she said. "I've bought pictures from Ben Howard. Haven't you?"

Edouard leaned deliberately across the table and took one of Audrey's hands in his. "Now," he said, "we get down to business."

The uneasy alliance flourished. They made of it, indeed, a kind of protective association, the object being to buy low, sell high, and avoid any unnecessary competition. This meant, of

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course, that Ben Howard was out; for temperament was something they could not risk.

But he was of small moment. His versatility really had been his only asset. There were other men, quite as competent, each in a more limited field, who had the added charm of modesty.

Goethe was their patron saint: Goethe who delighted in the work of copies, and called them sweetly, " pious frauds."

" After all," Audrey said, " what does it matter who paints a picture, so long as it is beautiful? "

" It doesn't," Edouard replied, " except for the money . . ."

" But it's silly, you know, this shocked disapproval of forgery. And quite recent. The nineteenth century with its damned morality. I suppose you know Michelangelo forged a Greek statue. Nobody thought the worse of *him.*"

" Yes, well," Edouard said, " still, even a forgery by Michelangelo has a certain intrinsic value . . . No, my dear, don't quibble. We walk on the shady side of the street. Let's be practical about it, or at least gallant—and keep one eye open for the gold coin in the gutter and the other for the police . . ."

" Know one thing, Edouard," Audrey said, " I never sell to poor people."

"At the prices you charge," Edouard said, "I should think not."

Of course, in all their association nothing had happened to them to equal the affair of the *Skull with Owl* of Malherbes. In one way they were enchanted to think their minds should work so brilliantly and so alike. But in another way they were not—after all they were in business, and this sort of thing must not happen. The coincidence they accepted, its implications they did not. There had been nothing underhand about the pictures, they had been done by quite different artists; Edouard had scorched his, Audrey hers.

The next question, of course, was what to do. One of the pictures, only sensibly, had to be destroyed. But which? Audrey was sure hers was the better of the two, Edouard his. The problem was reducing itself to an adamant tussle when suddenly a notice in the newspapers put a stop to the wrangling.

The Mendax Foundation announced a show of Malherbes. The Mendax, an old and respected art foundation founded fifty years before by Herman Mendax, had had wise curators who bought good painters when prices were low. Now it proposed to show—prompted possibly by the burning—its own Malherbes, together with others it could beg and borrow from museums and collectors.

" Well, now," Audrey said, " we can see a lot of them together and tell which of ours compares best in brilliance and style."

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They each received an invitation to the opening, and they went together. The crowd was the usual one: the seedy-looking rich and the rich-looking poor, the art-loving television stars, and that remarkable knot of people that just turns up anywhere. Everyone saw each other, and some saw the pictures.

Edouard and Audrey did not stay long. They did not have to. In the third room, staring them in the face, centred on a wall all on its own, was the *Skull with Owl.* Perfect, undamaged, unscorched.

For a moment they could do nothing but look in horror, fascinated. Then Audrey grasped Edouard's hand and squeezed it tightly. " Suppose . . ." she said, " suppose we had . . ."

They went over and looked at the card beneath the picture. It said merely, *Recent Acquisition. Purchased by the funds of the Foundation.*

" I have to know," Edouard said. " Come on."

They found the ancient Miss Neely, the assistant curator, in her office, with two roses and fern pinned to her shoulder in honour of the occasion.

" Oh yes, that! " she said. " Isn't it lovely? We think we were very lucky. Well, you see—" she smiled and nodded at someone passing—" forgive me—it was thought Malherbes had destroyed it, but he hadn't. It's quite a long story, really. A young American painter who lived near Malherbes went in the day after the—" she did not like to use the word—" burning, and there was the *Skull with Owl,* and he bought it on the spot. I think Malherbes had meant to—burn it, but something happened or he changed his mind, luckily for us. We'll probably never know. But oh, there's much more to the story than that. Some day, when we're not so busy, I'll—"

" What," Audrey said, " was the name of the American painter? "

" Oh," Miss Neely replied, " no one you've ever heard of. He's not well known at all. Ben Howard . . ."

Out in the street, Edouard asked, " All right. What shall we do now? "

" Let's go to the Metropolitan," Audrey said. " I'm an amateur art lover and I'd like to see some genuine oil paintings by old masters."

Later, after dinner, they sat on Audrey's cinnamon sofa before a comfortable fire. Coffee was done. Edouard slowly rolled an armagnac in his hand.

Finally he spoke. " Now? "

Audrey shrugged. " Why not? "

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He got up, walked over to the fireplace. On either side of it, leaning against the bricks, were their copies of *Skull with Owl.*

"Mine first," Edouard said, and threw his picture on to the flames.

"It fits, at least," Audrey said. Hers followed, and Edouard came back to the sofa. They sat in silence, watching the fire eat the canvas.

"All that planning. Well, it's turned out for the best, I suppose."

"I think so," Edouard said.

"One thing's certain. It's done for Ben Howard. If he's fool enough to sell to a museum, where experts can look and question . . . well, you know, sooner or later . . ."

"He'll be caught," Edouard said, leaning back smugly on the sofa. "But you know something?" He frowned. "I'm bothered about the picture itself. It's so much better than either of ours. And so much better than anything Ben Howard ever did. Do you think there could be a chance?"

"That it's real?" Audrey sounded sceptical. "I'm afraid you malign him. But suppose it were, he'd still be no threat to us if he's selling real pictures."

Edouard laughed. He picked up his glass and handed hers to Audrey. "Come on," he said, "a toast to Ben Howard."

"Why not?" Audrey said. "Yes. We owe him a lot."

"Were it not for Ben Howard," Edouard said, "we would not be sitting here, safe and sinful, with our feet up . . ."

Audrey smiled and raised her glass. "Contemplating the future . . ."

★ ★ ★

PIDGIN SOUP

There was a story—no doubt a fairy-tale—that at a banquet in the city of London he [J. H. Thomas] sat next to a member of the Chinese Embassy. Over the soup course, he, as usual, wanting to be sociable, said to him: "Likee soupee?" and the Chinaman replied: "Welly nicee; welly nicee." Conversation along those lines would have been difficult, so he confined his attention to the neighbour on the other side. When speech-making arrived, the Chinese gentleman rose to respond to a toast and delivered a speech in perfect English.

On resuming his seat, he asked the surprised Jimmy: "Likee speechee?" and he, equal to the occasion, replied: "Welly nicee—welly nicee."

HIS HONOUR JUDGE TUDOR REES,
Reserved Judgment

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My young Mary do's mind the Dairy,
While I go a Howing and Mowing each Morn;
Then hey the little Spinning Wheel
Merrily round do's reel,
while I am singing amidst the corn.

The Happy Husbandman, c. 1540

The tractor
Is an important factor
On any farm today;
Especially when making hay.
The horse,
Of course,
Is useful in a different way.

T. K. WILSON,
Tail-piece

Yeoman Stock

" I was thinking I might fallow that long field next season," I heard Jerry say.

Mr. Jeffs shrugged his shoulders.

" Thee'll never do much with un. Starveall, 'tis called; Starveall by name and Starveall by nature. Nigh forty years I've strove with un. 'Tis the only blot on a fine farm."

Then Jerry asked: " What'd you say to puttin' Cheviots on those hill pastures? "

" Nay, nay! Take a tip from an old un, me boy, and stick to black-faced sheep. Cheviots are all right on the big hills where they can run free; you'd never keep 'em in here. You'd be chivvyin' 'em and chasin' 'em over half the county. They'd give you Midnight Steeple-chases! "

Mr. Jeffs poured out another whisky and the two men fell

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silent. Jerry, perhaps, in a daydream saw his acres peopled with the broadbacked Oxford sheep and the deep-flanked Shorthorn cattle, his wheat rippling like a golden sea, heard the murmur of bees about his beanflowers and the swish of the knives of the mowing-machine in the long grass; while Mr. Jeffs looked back into the past, at his full barns and his sweet-smelling rickyards, at the fat cattle in the yard knee-deep in straw before the Christmas market, at the apple-blossom in the home orchard and the cherry's snowdrift on the slope of the hill.

JOHN MOORE,
Portrait of Elmbury

Smallholder

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.

ROBERT FROST,
The Pasture

Gentlemen Farmers

Mr. Weston looked at his book again.

" I see," he said, " that Farmer Mumby's two sons are written down here. Their names are John and Martin, and in the margin there are a few notes about them, telling of their pursuits; but besides pointing guns at rabbits, riding high-trotting horses and fast motor bicycles, what else can they do? "

" You forbade me," said Michael, " to mention women."

T. F. POWYS,
Mr. Weston's Good Wine

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Farm Hand

When the farm-boy blundering up
Drives the old hens 'neath the coop . . .
Then in the hovel milks the cow
And from the stackyard drives the sow;
And when the chimney smokes, goes in
Till breakfast's ready to begin.

JOHN CLARE, *The Ploughboy*

Stock-Taking

A piercing whistle drew my attention to the long red shape of the main farm buildings. I went there. A beefy red-faced man, who turned out to be the head horseman, thrust a heavy greasy chaos of leather into my arms and pointed to a bad-tempered-looking horse. I knew he was watching me surreptitiously from some corner. Long years in the army are definitely no help towards harnessing a recalcitrant cart-horse, especially if you do not know from which end to begin. After five minutes the bit was beneath its tail. A little later the yards and yards of reins were twisted round and round its sturdy legs and in its eyes was a bored soon-to-become angry look. It could not understand the most basic of English.

SACHA CARNEGIE, *Holiday from Life*

Grass Widows

Half the time they munched the grass, and all the time they lay
Down in the water-meadows, the lazy month of May,
A-chewing,
A-mooing,
To pass the hours away.

" Nice weather," said the brown cow.
" Ah," said the white.
" Grass is very tasty."
" Grass is all right."

Half the time they munched the grass, and all the time they lay
Down in the water-meadows, the lazy month of May,
A-chewing,
A-mooing,
To pass the hours away.

JAMES REEVES, *Cows*

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★ *Maybe a Radio Officer gets the habit of putting things across in a few words—in this story, that has won first prize in the Seafarers' Education Service Competition, D. P. Bramley makes clever use of the brief word limit.*

EXECUTIONER

BY D. P. BRAMLEY

THE ticking of the clock reminded him of the passing of time—always moving, undermining the foundations of the bridge of life. "Time," the clock was saying. "There is never enough time." He picked up a shoe and threw it at the clock. The missile struck the wall.

"It'll leave a mark." The girl sounded bored.

"Go to hell," he replied without enthusiasm. That was another thing, he thought. There was no enthusiasm. That had gone with the killings, hand in hand with many other things.

"When are we going to move?" She was plaintive now, and querulous. Damn her, he thought angrily. She's always reminding me.

"When the money arrives." He managed to control his voice.

"I'm sick of this bloody place!" She stood up, tall, slim, and attractive, and very young. "'South America,' you said. 'Sunshine and tequila!'" She laughed, short and bitter.

"Give me a cigarette." He lay back on the bed after she had lit one for him. He could taste the lipstick on the paper.

"You're always moaning," he said. "Permanently." He liked the sound of the word. "Permanently," he said again, rolling it out. "Why do you stay with me?" he asked, raising himself on one elbow. It would be better if she went away, he thought. Much better. There would be a surfeit of women for him in South America.

"I don't know." She was confused now. Her poise had gone. She looked immature and frightened.

"You used to know. When you saw them torture me, you said that they should all die."

"I loved you, then."

"No, you didn't. You've never loved anyone." He lay back on the dirty sheet.

She looked at him, lying there. His vest was grey with dirt.

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There was stubble about his weak chin. His eyes were bleary. His black hair was long and untidy. His square-fingered hands were acid-scarred, the fingers ugly with deep, running sores.

I loved you once, she was thinking, because you were brave. But now you are a coward. The revolution has made you that, and it has killed my love.

"Didn't you hear me?" he asked angrily—then he started to cough.

It's the acid, she thought. The fumes from the acid.

The revolution had been a bitter and merciless thing.

"You smoke too much. It has ruined your lungs." She lit a cigarette herself and expelled a thin, grey cloud of smoke from her mouth.

"Bloody rot!" He stopped coughing, and put a hand to his mouth, as though the silence frightened him.

"Greig will find you," she said, pushing at a loose strand of hair. "He always does find the traitors." Her face felt greasy. She stood up from the stool by the bed, and went to examine her face in the cracked mirror that hung on one of the walls. There was a shaded light over the mirror, and a cockroach scurried across the glass when she switched it on.

"Put out that light!" He enunciated the words perfectly, afraid that speech would start the coughing again. "You know I can't stand too much light."

She switched off the ceiling light. Now the room's only illumination was a small bulb near the dressing-table. A shirt had been draped over the thin lampshade. The room was full of long, dark shadows. She sat down on the stool. Her face still felt greasy. She rubbed at it with her hand.

It's this waiting, he was thinking, as he scratched at the inside of his leg. This blasted waiting. Why couldn't they send the money? Then he could go away from the revolution and all the misery it had brought to him. But Greig was looking for him!

That was another factor. Big, mighty Greig. The instigator, then the mainstay of the revolution.

The man on the bed shuddered uncontrollably. He had betrayed Greig! He remembered how Greig had dealt with him the first time he had made a mistake. The bucket of acid. The men holding his hands. The cool feeling—then the sudden bite of pain.

The bed-springs creaked as he shuddered.

The woman looked at the frightened man. She was thinking back, projecting her mind through memory to the first time. He had been handsome then. Now he was afraid, and the sweat of the coward was on his top lip.

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They were both silent. The only sound was the clock, ticking away life's time in sharp seconds.

That clock! he was thinking. On and on like the voice of conscience. "You are a murderer," it was saying now. "A murderer."

He felt the breath rising in his throat. The words were nearly on his lips. *No!* he wanted to shout. *It was Greig.* He made me do it. Look at my hands, my hands—

But the clock ticked remorselessly. "You are a murderer . . . a murderer."

"What was that?" The girl's voice made him jump.

"What was what?" he asked, sitting up. His eyes were wide and frightened.

"I thought I heard something." She went over to the door and opened it slowly. A draught swept into the room like a cleaner's brush, and rustled the papers on the dressing-table. "There's nobody out here." She closed the door again.

He saw that she was shivering. "It's damned cold," she said, as she started to pace up and down the room, beating her hands together.

Cold? he thought. How can I be cold, when the sweat is trickling down my back, and there is more sweat in the thin wisps of the moustache on my lip? Cold?

"Are you frightened?" he asked her. She had been Greig's secretary.

"Of Greig? Yes, I'm frightened." She stopped pacing, and looked at him. "Like you. When Greig finds us, it will mean death. You know that, don't you?" She almost shouted the words.

"Shut up!" He jumped from the bed and took hold of her shoulders, but the coughing attacked him before he could strike her face.

She helped him back to the bed. He lay down and closed his eyes. She leaned over him to straighten the pillow. He put up his hand and touched her face, his fingers exploring the well-known contours as he played the game of blind man. Then his fingers were in the brown of her hair, and he had dragged her down until her face was inches from his own. His eyes opened.

"Did you betray me?" he hissed. "Was it you?"

"Betray?" Her voice trembled. Her hands were shaking. "Why should I?" But her eyes were fear-filled.

He released her, then pushed at her head with the flat of his hand. She tripped on the loose sheet from the bed, and sprawled in a flurry of clothing on the floor.

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"Pig!" she shouted at him, her voice loud in the closeness of the room. "Killer!"

The word brought him to his feet. His eyes glazed as he moved towards her. His face was set like a death-mask, suddenly cold and aloof.

"You shouldn't say things like that." His hand came out like an unsheathed claw, and gripped her blouse. He pulled, and the material ripped. Her white skin irritated him. His fingers left red imprints in the flesh of her shoulder after he had gripped her and hauled her to her feet.

The light-bulb blinked once, twice, then slowly faded. The room was pitch-black, drained of light.

"Damn!" He released the girl, and she collapsed on to the bed. "Get a bulb!" he snapped. "There's one in the bathroom. And don't try to run away. I'd always find you, just like Greig."

She wanted to tell him to go to hell, but the words wouldn't come. She went to the door. The bathroom was down the corridor, away from the flat. The door closed behind her.

So quiet. Funny, the clock had stopped! A lifetime ended? So dark. Imagination builds images of crawling things. Senses strain; ears tense, listening to the slight creak of floorboards; the steady bang of an unfastened door; then eyes, peering, but all is black and deep; nose twitching, sniffing for the perfume of woman or the stale smell of man.

Terror! Why? Unreasonable, but still there, crawling on the surface of the skin like a wet crab. The faces of the people he had killed, floating disembodied. He wanted to scream, but what voice was there to scream with?

He was remembering the blood. How much there had been! Sudden, shocking spurts. Life flooding into the earth of the floors in the cellars of the prison.

There was a cold gust of wind as the door opened and closed. For one brief instant, a creaking of floorboards from the corridor; then that deep darkness again.

His heart was jumping violently. He could feel it thudding against his ribs. "Is that you, Anna?" His voice trembled.

There was no reply.

The goosepimples were standing out on the surface of his skin.

"Is that you?" he screamed.

Still that terrible deep silence, like the void of death.

His trembling fingers found the edge of the dressing-table; then explored quickly for the bottle. He found it, and his hand closed about its slim neck. He tested the weight of it; then listened, scarcely breathing. The room was silent.

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"Anna?" The breath gushed from his mouth like a cataract. He had been holding his breath, and this sudden use of his lungs made the word vibrate in the room. He stood stock still with shock, as the sound seemed to echo, his own voice repeating itself. The sweat was between his vest and skin, and the cotton was sticking to him. "Anna?" he said again.

"Yes?" She had opened the door quietly, and seemed to be waiting in the corridor.

"Don't move!" he shouted at her, jumping back, hitting the bed. "There's somebody else in the room."

"Don't be a fool," she snorted as she came in, closing the door behind her.

"Light!" the young man screamed—for some reason, he had climbed on to the bed. "Quick, quick, the light!" A hand was gripping his ankle.

He began to scream in the extremity of his fear. He struck downwards with the bottle, but the hand was on his throat, squeezing, restricting, and there was nothing but kaleidoscopic light, then the whirlpool of death.

The ceiling light clicked on.

Anna stood by the switch, looking at Greig. "He's dead?" she asked.

"Yes." Greig smiled and nodded. His blue eyes twinkled charmingly behind their windows of glass. He rubbed his large, strong hands together.

"Such a coward," he smiled, flexing his arms. "So weak." He sat down beside the body on the bed, and lit a cheroot. Anna still stood by the door, watching the heavily-built man.

"You did well, Anna," Greig smiled. The smile seemed to be a permanent fixture. "Very well. You kept him here just the right length of time."

He reached inside his coat, and took out a manila envelope. "Here!" He tossed it to her, and she caught it expertly.

"We intercepted the courier in the alley behind the house."

Anna split the flap with a thumbnail, and looked inside. "Ten thousand?" she asked.

"Ten thousand, as promised. You have served the revolution well."

"The revolution?" She began to laugh: nervous, girlish, but still genuine mirth.

She continued to laugh as she took a small, nickel-plated revolver from a skirt-pocket and pumped the steel-tipped, killing bullets into the large target sitting on the bed.

Greig was thrown back with the force of the shots. His legs

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went straight up in the air as he tipped over the edge of the bed. Then there was a sudden thump as his body hit the floor.

Anna took her coat from the hook behind the door.

She went round the bed, and looked at Greig. His blood was beginning to stain the carpet. He was still smiling.

She turned and looked at the now-blue face of the young man. His eyes were wide and staring. His tongue was protruding from his open mouth. It was beginning to turn black.

She took one of his white hands and kissed the marble-coldness of the palm. She walked to the door that led to sunshine and tequila.

"I loved him, you see," she said to no one in particular as she turned in the doorway. Then the door closed behind her, and it seemed final, like the last sentence of a novel.

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★ ★ ★

REAL ESTATE

We purchased a nice old house in the hills,
Where at night, now, we hear the whippoorwills
And the termites gnawing the few good sills.

We were unaware what a country place meant,
Till we beheld from our upstairs casement
The brook that ran babbling into the basement.

No season or day here is twice the same,
And the shy, small animals grow so tame
That we call the rats and the mice by name.

By our bed, whenever the lost wind wails,
The rain tinkles gaily in crocks and pails,
And the lights wink out as the power fails.

When the morning breaks, along with the plumbing,
We step out to watch the woodpecker drumming
And flush a new covey of house guests coming.

So life on the land moves serenely on,
With the wild deer cropping the crops at dawn
And the well and the bankbook overdrawn.

C. S. JENNISON,
The View From Our Land

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WIDE SLEEPING-BAG

It was the most sensible thing I could do

BY ARTURO VIVANTE

SOMETIMES I wish things so intensely that they happen. But the circumstances through which they come about, the ways chosen to let me have what I want, are invariably quite different from those I had in mind. It's as if fate cared only for the end, not the means. And often I feel responsible, even guilty, over the outcome.

Something of this sort happened to me one summer when I worked in the Canadian North. The job—a student job which my zoology professor had found for me—was to go round the forest with a man in the forestry service looking for budworms. These are minute insects that enter the buds of trees and destroy them, stunting the growth of the tree itself. They are more destructive than forest fires for the spruce and balsam woods of that region.

My boss—a tall, thin, quiet man—and I would clip a few small branches in different places, collect them, and bring the bundle to the laboratory, a log cabin by a lake in the backwoods. My boss would examine under a microscope any budworms he found, to see if they had parasites. These parasites were potentially our allies. He thought that if he could find a suitable parasite he would be able to check the budworm infestation. He intended to send the parasite to a culture station down south where they would let it multiply by the million, and then scatter these millions over the forest from aeroplanes. The budworms would be killed and the trees would be quite green again. The trouble was that the parasites themselves were diseased. What we needed was a healthy parasite. Our search took us over vast stretches of forest in a country laced by rivers and lakes.

The backwoods were like an ocean—you couldn't venture too far in them alone without a feeling of awe. There was a sense of danger lurking in their darkness and in their deep silence, which the rare sound of birds made deeper still. Walking in the woods you were aware of those who had lost their way; you thought

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of the stories about them and the advice that you were continually given: if you get lost, listen for the sound of a motor boat on the lake. Somehow there was no encouragement to wander far.

Sometimes we would be away from the laboratory for just a few hours, sometimes for a few days, and once for a fortnight. My boss had his wife with him, and during the shorter trips she remained at the laboratory, but if the trip took longer than one day she came with us. The longer trips were usually to some far corner of the lake, and we used to go there in a small outboard motor boat.

Navigation was difficult because of the many inlets, bays, islands, and straits. The lake was called Star Lake because of its shape, but it was much more complicated than the conventional figure of a star, and from the sky it must have looked like a blue octopus. We always took a map and a compass with us.

When we reached our destination we would pull the boat up on the shore, start clipping branches, and then, towards evening, cook our meal over a fire. When night came, we used to pitch a tent, take our sleeping-bags out of the boat, and go to sleep. I had a small sleeping-bag, and my boss had a huge, wide one, specially made for two, in which he and his wife would sleep.

He was a good sort, my boss. When I made a mistake he would pass it over. Once I miscounted the budworms, and he went so far as to say, " Good, it shows you are not a calculating machine." It was a fine attitude, I thought.

He could imitate the songs of birds and also translate them into English. He claimed that one said, " Sweet, sweet, sweet . . . Canada, Canada, Canada." But best of all he knew the loons. Once, when we were in the middle of the lake, he saw a loon flying a long way up. He made a loon call, and it swooped down till it wasn't more than a few feet from us.

" What did you say to him?" his wife asked, when she had recovered her breath.

" I said, ' Come on down,' " my boss said, smiling at her.

But that wasn't the end of it. The loon, having got up again, made a cry.

" What did *he* say? " she asked.

" He said, ' I thought you were a loon.' "

She must have been about twenty-six, he was thirty, and I was eighteen, given to wild dreams, very apt to fall in love at first sight.

My boss's wife was pretty, with light chestnut hair parted on the side. Sometimes she washed her hair in the lake, and then for a long time she combed it in the sun. She never wore jeans, always thin, silky dresses, and brought with her an air of delicacy.

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When she stood on the wharf and the wind blew her skirt, pressing it against her on one side and making it flutter on the other, she looked wonderful. When they were out of the log cabin, I would sometimes steal into their bedroom and touch her clothes, smell the bottles of perfume.

So pretty, sophisticated, and city-bred my boss's wife was, I wondered how she could stand living in the backwoods with us all that time. But I guess she loved him. And he loved her.

They made a nice couple, especially when they were in the wide sleeping-bag together. Sometimes I used to hear them laughing. The laughing would fade into whispers, the whispers fade into silence, and I knew love had lulled them to sleep.

Then, in vain efforts to improve my position, I would give scissor-like kicks to my bag, but my position was that of a bachelor, and a single bed is a bachelor's lot. I had only her image. It kept me awake, it put me to sleep. But compared with the sleep they were sleeping, my sleep was mere acquiescence.

I thought I loved her, I thought I loved her far more than he. And maybe I did. Maybe in my loneliness my love was stronger than his in his closeness. I never revealed it, of course, and perhaps she never knew that I loved her, unless I gave myself away by looking too far the other way when we met, or by going a little too eagerly on errands for her. She'd make a gesture as if she wanted some object. "Can I get you something?" I'd say. She would tell me and I would rush for it. Once her husband chuckled about it, I know.

I remember entertaining strange thoughts. I wondered what it would be like if he should suddenly leave us alone. At night, before going to sleep, I mused on the possibilities. I imagined a telegram arriving and saying that he was urgently needed in Ottawa for a couple of days. I pictured him entrusting his wife to my care. In my mind he was in Ottawa already; writing a letter to tell her he would have to postpone his return for a while. It was silly, of course, because if any wire of the kind had come, I am sure she would have gone with him. The thought provided wonderful entertainment, nevertheless.

In these thoughts I never wished him any harm, I never imagined anything unpleasant happening to him. I liked him, as I have already said. All I wanted, in the first act of my imaginary play, was a reason for being left alone with her in the second. Once the second act had begun, I was over the hump, I was happy. It was like having climbed to the Garden of Eden where I could indulge in love and sleep and all comfort. As for the third act—the inevitable return of her husband—it usually wasn't attempted. The author, who was at once spectator and

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actor, relied on the second act to put him to sleep and spare him the burden of a solution.

Well, so much for desire and the fancy, now here's reality.

One day my boss decided to look for that healthy parasite at the north end of the lake, about thirty miles away in a straight line, but at least double that distance the way we should have to go. Since he planned to stay for several days, his wife came, too. We set off, with our little motor boat loaded with supplies, tent, and equipment, and arrived late in the evening.

No sooner were we there than it began raining hard. We pitched the tent and then tried lighting a fire, but it was so difficult we gave it up. I collected some small pieces of wood and put them under the tent to dry. After a cold supper, she made hot chocolate over an alcohol burner. Then we laid out our sleeping-bags and wriggled into them. I could hear the rain making music over the taut canvas of the tent, sweeping it lightly, then more and more loudly into a furious crescendo, when again it would almost cease.

I thought how cosy it must be in their sleeping-bag. More intensely than ever, I wished.

The next morning it was still raining. The wind was blowing hard and the lake had become rough. As we couldn't do any work, we stayed inside the tent. Towards evening she said she wasn't well. We made supper, but she ate only a few spoonfuls of soup. Two or three times during the night, I heard his worried voice asking her how she was feeling.

In the morning she wasn't any better, and didn't get up. It was still raining. He hoped that hot tea, aspirin, and rest would cure her, but in the afternoon she had a chill. Though we covered her with all the warm things we had, my sleeping-bag included, she continued to shiver. Her eyes were shining. Her teeth chattered, and she lay with her arms and legs folded tightly. She had a high fever. She said it was nothing, but my boss was worried. He paced round the tent restlessly.

"I'll have to get a doctor," he said.

"I'll go," I said.

"No, you don't know the way round the lake; it's so complicated. I can't let you risk it."

"Why don't we all go back in the boat?" I asked.

"It's too rough for her; she'd get wet through."

"We'll wrap the tent round her."

"She gets sea-sick," he said. "And it's too rough; the boat might capsize. It's not so bad if one of us drowns, but we don't want the three of us to sink."

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" Let me go," I insisted.

" No. You've never been here before; it's my third trip. With this mist it's hard to make out where you are. Soon it will be dark. And then, you are not as good a swimmer as I am. I'll go straight away and come back with the doctor."

I didn't think it was all that risky, but he was so determined that I could only abide by his wishes.

" Take good care of her," he said as I shoved the boat off.

" Don't worry," I said.

The waves were high, and the boat tossed up and down wildly. At one point the propeller was out of the water, beating the air with a tearing noise; then it dipped again, and he was off in deep water.

He waved good-bye.

I saw him disappear into the mist. For some time after that I could hear the noise of the engine becoming fainter and fainter. Then I could hear only the wind and the rain.

" Has he gone? " she asked.

" Yes," I said.

She sighed.

I was able to light a fire, so I made her some tea. With infinite care I held the cup for her while she sipped. She tried to smile at me, but I could see it wasn't easy.

She said she had a splitting headache. I thought of meningitis. She coughed a little. I thought of pneumonia. And there I was, alone in the wide forest with a seriously sick woman.

" Take your sleeping-bag," she said, after I had eaten my supper.

" No, I don't need it. I'll sit up by the fire."

" Do take it," she said.

I could hear her teeth chattering; she was having another shivering fit. " No, no," I said. " You are cold even with it."

She didn't answer.

I put my sweater over her. I loved her so much that if it would have been of any help I'd have taken off my shirt and put that over her, too. I felt I loved her so, that I would do anything for her, even die. I wished I was ill instead of her.

The chill would wear off, but after a time she would be taken by another, and she would curl up, trying to make herself smaller.

" All these bedclothes and I'm still cold," she said. " I don't understand." She had a sweet, very feminine voice that affected me deeply.

I went out and tried to stir the fire. After a while, in spite of the rain, I had it going pretty well. I walked to the water's

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edge and picked up some flat stones which I heated by the fire and then set around her. She said they helped, but I found they became cold very quickly. It was hard to find wood that was even comparatively dry. Two days of rain had made nearly everything soggy, and I was tired out. I couldn't keep the fire going.

Finally I gave up and went to sit in a corner of the tent. Soon I began to feel cold myself. I even started shivering, but I was all right, I wasn't ill.

She moaned, and I thought she was delirious. Suddenly she sat up and looked at me with frightened eyes. "I think I'm going to die," she said.

"Of course you're not going to die!" I said cheerfully, rushing over to her and taking hold of her hands. "Lie down," I added, pulling the bedclothes over her shoulders.

"Do you think he'll make it? I think he'll never make it. He'll be drowned in the lake."

"No one will be drowned," I said.

At that moment it thundered. The weather wasn't collaborating.

"We are all going to die," she said, as a new fit of trembling came over her.

"Don't be silly. I'll make you another cup of hot tea."

"The fire's out," she said, sitting up again.

She was trembling, and there she was, uncovered, exposed to the humid, cold air.

"Get back," I said. "Get back or you'll catch more cold."

Her face looked terror-stricken. The hurricane lamp made it appear worse. She grasped my arms. "You get in here, too," she said.

I knew it was the most sensible thing I could do.

"All right," I said, with no thought other than that of keeping her warm. I took off my shoes and slipped into the double sleeping-bag with her.

"Hug me tight," she said.

I did.

"Tighter."

I hugged her as tightly as I could. For a while she continued shivering; then she stopped. Slowly I released her. I sensed that the heat of my body had achieved something. She felt relaxed and soft again, whereas before she had been stiff and hard.

"Ah, I feel better now," she said.

"I am glad, I am glad."

"You are very warm."

"Yes," I said.

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I knew I was warm. It wasn't the first time I had been used as a heater. When I was a child, I would slip into my mother's bed to warm it for her. When she came up to her room, she would carry me back to the cot.

I felt her slowly relaxing into sleep. I could feel her breath on my eyelids. I could hear her breathing quietly and regularly. I could sense that the fever was down. I thought I had cured her, and felt intensely pleased.

Now that she was warm, I wondered if I should leave her. No, she might feel cold again, I said to myself, and I stayed. I remember kissing her very lightly on her shoulder and her hair while she slept.

One moment I thought she was waking. Her fingers curved round my hand. Perhaps she thought it was her husband's. She sighed faintly. Then I, too, fell asleep.

I woke early in the morning. She was still sleeping. I made some coffee, and kept some water hot for when she woke up.

She slept for another two hours. Sitting near her, I watched her. I think I must have watched for an hour without moving. I never tired of the sight of her. Then I saw her waking, and her first words were, "I feel better."

I poured her a cup of steaming-hot coffee, and made her some toast.

An hour later, I heard the noise of the motor boat, and went down to the water to meet the doctor and my boss.

At the end of the summer, when my job was over, they took me by car to the station. As the train was about to leave, my boss said something to his wife, and then he whispered in my ear, "I know something about you that you don't think I know."

"What?" I asked, mystified.

"You slept in my sleeping-bag. My wife told me."

"I—"

"It's all right; you don't have to explain," he said, winking. "I know all about it. Thank you for keeping her warm."

He had his arm round her shoulder and they were both smiling. We shook hands. Then they wished me good-bye.

As the train started moving, they waved. They were laughing, but I was blushing, even a bit disappointed, and it took a great effort for me to smile.

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PRAISING WITH FAINT DAMNS?

Try praising your wife, even if it frightens her at first.

BILLY SUNDAY

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A royal ball—
a scented night
of early summer

I MUST take you back to musical comedy of the year 1923. But it was not on the stage. It was the life of every week. Or, not exaggerating at all, the life of once a month. The Viennese librettists were not nearly so far from reality as those of today. There's very little in *The Merry Widow* which couldn't have happened.

In the Vienna of 1923 that life was all over, but in Bucharest it was still half alive. My sister and I were then Rumanians. Before 1918 we had been Hungarians. We never really felt that we were either, for the family is of Polish origin and held its land by direct grant of the Emperor. We took to our new nationality with decent resignation, and were invited everywhere. We were flat broke, but one could have a lot of formal fun even within the rigid conventions of Bucharest society on next to nothing a year.

The rules of the game of Honour were really, you know, common sense. Like all conventions, they were ridiculous but they prevented anarchy.

I accepted them with a casual amusement which should have enabled me to handle them easily. Yet I am still bothered by

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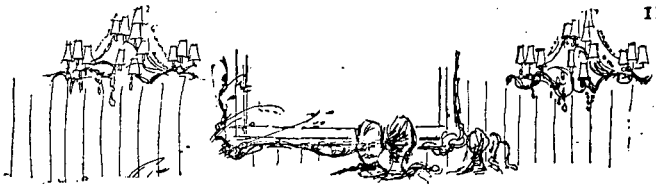

SWORDS & CHAMPAGNE

BY GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

the memory of an act which would have been condemned as unforgivably dishonourable by all my contemporaries. That it was for the sake of my sister made no difference—made it worse, if anything.

To the me of today what I did then seems discreet and sensible. Like the rest of us I have grown up—or down, perhaps. It's over twenty years since my sister and I dropped our titles, and long before that we had abandoned all the ways of life and thought which they represented. But I can't get over the fact that I couldn't look myself in the face. And still today a slight inward blush is perceptible.

Magda and I had been asked to the royal ball at the Military Club. It was a scented night of late spring. While the King and Queen were present, everything went smoothly according to the rules of 1910; but when they cleared off a little after midnight, and the well-born public settled down to enjoy itself, there was no feeling of ease.

Partly it was the harassing light, too hard for traditional illusion. The chandeliers had only recently been adapted from gas to electricity. The women were wearing the short and unceremonious frocks of 1923 for the first formal occasion. Magda said that she liked them in daytime, but felt in the evening as if she were waltzing in her underclothes. The officers, of course, were a regular chocolate-box of colour, though uneasily aware that pale blue and gold were hardly more effective in a

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ballroom than they had been in battle. They could no longer afford good cloth.

Only the few foreigners, dressed in the black-and-white of secure convention, were enjoying themselves without a care. They were mostly diplomats, but there were a few socially-acceptable representatives of industry and finance—among them, Rob Tymson. He was five years older than I, but I felt responsible for him. He seemed to be cheerfully unattached, knocking back champagne at the bar with a French banker called Delorme, and exchanging pleasant reminiscences of sudden death in the St. Quentin sector of the Western Front. So I went off and danced . . .

My first premonition of something wrong was half an hour later when I saw Magda and Rob dancing together, with everybody trying hard not to stare at them. I thought that perhaps he had proposed at last and then committed the crime of kissing her in public. But it was not that.

When I had managed to draw them unobtrusively out of the crowd and on to a quiet balcony, Magda said, " Rob is going to fight a duel."

Well, it was just possible—though Rob was a typical Englishman: tall, fair, full of responsibility and common sense. He was a Londoner, son and heir of a big steel firm, who had come out to Bucharest for three weeks to sign a government contract. At first he had been a little supercilious; but as soon as he realised that when a minister said three weeks precisely he meant six months perhaps, Rob determined to stay on and enjoy himself. When in the mood, he could play his part in our local comedy as flamboyantly as the British colonel in attendance upon Prince Florizel. That new, theatrical character of his might have been up to anything.

" I am not going to fight a duel," said Rob, very red in the face. " It is barbarous to risk murdering a man just because he lost his temper."

" You can choose pistols," Magda advised him quite correctly. " You were in the war. You must know enough about it to be able to miss him."

" Will you try to understand, Magda, that Englishmen do not fight duels? "

" Oh, but you must, Rob! You can't help it," she insisted. " Ask Adrian to explain. He'll tell you how silly it all is."

Rob stared at us as if we were two slim, dark, eager, fallen angels from the pit. There we were, Count Adrian and Countess Magda, with no parents, no land, no money, nothing to hold on to but our conventions of honour, male and female, and quite

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intelligent enough to find them comic. The Rumanian duel was normally a farce without any danger at all. Magda knew it as well as I did. That was why she was perfectly willing for him to do the proper thing although she was in love with him.

I sent Magda off to dance. She doesn't come into my story at all, the darling. She was a motive, nothing else. A most lovely motive for dishonourable conduct.

With some difficulty I got out of Rob what had happened. Delorme and he had been talking French and discussing the Rumanian Army. Rob couldn't accept those gorgeous cockatoos upon the dance floor as real soldiers. A soldier to him was a bit of shapeless, suffering humanity, inexplicably cheerful, and plastered with mud. What with champagne and disapproval, he had probably been talking a little too loudly.

"The cloakroom is stacked with their silly swords," he had said to Delorme. "And they couldn't draw them if they wanted to, because the hilt is cast in one piece with the scabbard."

His shoulder was roughly hauled round. He met the enraged eyes of a Rumanian captain, who smartly slapped him across the cheek with open hand.

Rob was a competent welterweight and his reaction was nearly immediate. Nearly. Sheer surprise used up a fraction of time. So did reluctance—for he was not the type to start a rough-house in the middle of a musical comedy.

Before his right hook could get fairly started, he was gripped from behind. Other bystanders were holding—but more conventionally—his opponent. Between the two groups a minor diplomat and a Rumanian general were advising patience. They were practised in such scenes and knew their duty. I've done it myself. One acts with the quiet decision of the knowledgeable man who throws the dog out just before it is sick.

"Damn it!" Rob exclaimed indignantly. "I seemed to be caught up in a sort of ceremony without anybody asking me."

Well, of course, he had been. Blue-and-gold officers closed in casually to hide the unfortunate affair from the dance floor. Between Rob's friends and the defiant captain's friends the general and the minor diplomat observed the frontier. They turned to the bar and called for drinks as if their position had been the merest accident.

Anybody who had not seen or heard the slap would have suspected nothing. Delorme received the captain's card. He told Rob to go away and dance, and to look calmly composed.

When Rob at last got Magda to himself—partners were still booked on programmes with little white pencils—he found to his horror that she knew all about the incident. Everybody

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agreed, she told him, that it had been beautifully managed. They were bursting with curiosity to know what he would do, and trying hard not to show it.

"I shouldn't have been talking so damned loud," Rob said to me. "Adrian, I feel the right move is to apologise."

"But you can't apologise."

"Why can't I?"

"Because you are the insulted party. Only he can apologise."

"Then what *can* I do?"

"Nothing—except send him a challenge."

I might as well have asked him to play ring-a-ring-o'-roses in the courtyard of the Bank of England. He became offensively British. He pointed out that he was a civilised westerner visiting Rumania in order to assist in the reconstruction of the country, and that he had had enough fighting to last him the rest of his life, and wasn't going to begin again on Rumanian officers. So I shut up.

Rob stalked back to the ballroom, and did his best to appear composed; but all he could manage was a fixed grin. He went home early in the open carriage which he had romantically retained for his private use during his stay in Bucharest—storming to himself, I should guess, that he ought to have smashed the insolent captain's face, even if he had to tread on officious bystanders to get at him. But I doubt if that mood lasted long when he observed himself jingling magnificently through the Rumanian night behind a pair of black and lively horses like a baron in a whisky advertisement.

The next morning he felt like a plain businessman with a headache, living in a cosmopolitan hotel packed with other businessmen with other headaches. He did not want to see uniforms, horses, swords, and the idle poor for the rest of his life. I don't suppose he even wanted to see Magda.

He must have been sourly glad that he had an appointment with Mr. Marguliesh. The world of Marguliesh was sane, and he, Rob, belonged to it.

Mr. Marguliesh was his financial adviser and the correspondent of his London bankers. Rob liked him. We all did. Marguliesh represented a vanished world. His white waistcoat, his taste in cigars, and his obvious integrity would have graced the City of London.

Marguliesh told me afterwards that he was shocked at Rob's appearance. He immediately rang for his senior bank servant —about eighty years old and liveried in chocolate and silver— who came with his keys of office and unlocked a cupboard in the

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walnut panelling. There was something in it to suit every mood. Brandy and ginger-ale was Marguliesh's prescription for Rob.

When he was halfway through his long, golden glass and they had discussed some sound and sober question of shipment against treasury bills, Marguliesh delicately referred to private problems.

" It's half past eleven," Rob protested, " and nobody who was at the ball is up yet. How on earth do you know? "

It was never any good putting that question to Marguliesh. He knew everything. It always seemed natural that he should. As likely as not he had the barman on his pay roll.

Rob cursed all primitive societies and finally asked Marguliesh —assuming that he would have the same point of view as a properly brought up English banker—whether he would fight a duel himself.

" Fortunately," said Mr. Marguliesh dryly, " I am not officially a gentleman."

" Well, damn it, I'm not officially a gentleman either! "

" Oh, my dear sir, the aristocracy of industry! We accept it at last. And then, you were a lieutenant-colonel in the war. Of course, there is always a doubt who is and who is not a gentleman in England. It appears to depend on education, which is so

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difficult for us. Here the last thing one expects of a gentleman is education. But if you send this fellow a challenge you put the matter beyond question."

Rob asked if he had to be a bloody fool in order to be rubber-stamped as a gentleman.

"Yes," said Marguliesh. "Public opinion here doesn't matter to you one way or the other. But if you ever wanted to marry into the aristocracy, how much more smoothly things would go for her!"

He was our banker, too—though that was a pretty hopeless task. And I know he was just as anxious about Magda's future as I was. But Rob had the Englishman's dislike of anyone suspecting his emotions. In spite of the civilising influence of brandy and ginger-ale he denied furiously that he had any intention of marrying into the aristocracy.

"A challenge would also do no harm to business," Marguliesh suggested.

"I think, if I may say so, that is rather a sordid way of looking at it," said Rob—and he cashed a cheque and scowled his way out.

He lunched at his hotel in a furious temper. It was not improved by a message from the British Legation, asking if he could possibly make it convenient to have tea with the Second Secretary. Even the hotel porter seemed, from the look in his eyes, to know what the invitation was about. I've no doubt he did. He was possibly taking bets on what this sympathetic but self-sufficient Englishman would do.

Rob, conscious only of having behaved with dignity and self-restraint, stuck a carnation in the buttonhole of his best suit and told his smart driver—also looking far too interested in what was none of his business—to bowl straight through the gates of the Legation and pull up in the courtyard instead of waiting in the road. He loathed the Second Secretary. The man was intolerably handsome and certain never to say anything he shouldn't in the whole course of his life. As a matter of fact such inhuman perfection did no good to his career, but tactlessness was a point upon which Rob was sensitive.

"I am sure the Minister would like me to say how much he appreciates the way you have entered into the life of the country," the Second Secretary began.

Rob dealt with his tea and toast, and waited. He knew very well that no diplomat would be impolite to anyone who had influential connections in the world of heavy industry at home. On the other hand he did feel as if he were back in the headmaster's study.

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"Could it be, could it possibly be that you are making yourself a little conspicuous? This coachman of yours and—er—hand-kissing?"

"When in Rome, I do as the Romans do."

"Quite, quite, Tymson! Still, is there perhaps a slight touch of triumph over the barbarians? Now, what is the truth of this unfortunate episode?"

Rob, now cut down to size, mumbled his story. At the mention of the undrawable swords the Second Secretary shut his eyes for an instant with an expression of weary pain. I knew him well, and I'm prepared to swear that was his gesture.

"You could not have said anything more unforgivable!"

"But, hell, it's true!"

"That makes it all the worse. The uniform calls for a sword, but the pay of an officer, since the currency collapsed, does not permit him to buy one. So naturally they are all ultra-sensitive. However that may be, the Minister wishes you to take no notice of this slap."

"I don't intend to."

"Quite right. You show our culture even at the momentary expense of our prestige."

Rob asked him why there should be any momentary expense. He pointed out that the English had not fought duels for a hundred years and that nobody in his senses expected them to start now. And he added that if diplomats couldn't keep up the prestige of the Empire without plain businessmen challenging a lot of Balkan officers to help them . . .

"The Rumanians do not like to be considered Balkan," said the Second Secretary.

Rob remarked that he was not talking to a Rumanian, and bowed himself out in a manner which, I gather, was offensively continental and conspicuous.

Back at his hotel, Rob found Delorme in the bar and greeted him as his only friend. Delorme had been a comrade-in-arms, at any rate at midnight. He was civilised, concise, and reasonable, and would thoroughly enjoy explaining English customs to Rumanians and Rumanian customs to English when he didn't know much about either.

"The captain is expecting you to send a friend to call on him," Delorme said.

"I wouldn't send my worst enemy to call on him."

Delorme made it clear what he meant. Rob repeated his lecture: that duels were a hundred years out of date. He patted Delorme on the shoulder and asked him to have a drink.

"The duel has gone out even in France," he said.

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"I beg you will not repeat your *even* in France, monsieur," Delorme replied.

Rob protested desperately that he meant that in the most gallant of countries only politicians and critics fought duels any more, and who the hell cared if they killed each other?

But Delorme had gone.

Though I did not know all the details of that unfortunate day till afterwards, I guessed that Rob would be readier to listen to me than he had been the night before. To my mind the solution was obvious. He should give full play to the musical comedy manners which were slowly overcoming his Englishness, and go through the ridiculous and bloodless farce of a Rumanian duel. I was very young and confident. I should have realised that I might possibly be mistaken.

Still, I only decided to intervene after I had run into Delorme drinking alone and looking extremely Napoleonic and disdainful. He gave me the news, but was not prepared, he said, further to discuss my good friend, M. Tymson. He added that this was the twentieth century, but that British manners were sometimes enough to make one forget it. After that I went up to Rob's room, for I was very fond of him. I vaguely felt that no one short of a crown prince or a millionaire was good enough for Magda; on the other hand I had not met a specimen of either whom I respected as I did Rob.

He had taken refuge in his business correspondence, and was not at all pleased when I pretended to think that he was clearing up his affairs. He said that a man of my intelligence ought to understand his point of view without having it explained all over again.

"I do, Rob," I assured him. "You object to bloodshed. But you will be delighted to put on the gloves with him, cut his eyes open, and knock out half his teeth."

"At least I shouldn't risk killing him."

"Who's asking you to kill him? You surely don't think there is any risk in a modern duel? It's against the law, and nobody wants to be run in."

"I don't understand," said Rob. "Then why bother?"

"Why bother with a carriage and pair when you can use a car? I do wish you'd believe that Magda and I are only trying to help."

Rob remarked that he considered my influence very bad for Magda—in a proprietary tone which was thoroughly promising—and then he said, "But I don't know the drill. Would you yourself second me or whatever it's called?"

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"Of course. An honour."

"And what do I fight him with?"

"In principle, you can choose."

"Well, I did a course of bayonet fighting once. Can I have at him with rifle and bayonet?"

That should have warned me. I should have spotted that slow rising of fury to the brain which the English call logic. But I thought he was just being perverse.

"No, you can't. It has to be pistols, so that you can fire in the air if you wish."

"What's the good of a duel then?"

"The point is, Rob, that he will fire in the air and so will you. But you can't count on it."

"If I can't count on it, I'm damned if I do it. I should look a silly clot blazing away at the sky while he's aiming at six o'clock on the bull. If I'm going to fight him at all, I'll fight him square. How about swords?"

I insisted that swords were out of the question, but he knew that wasn't strictly true and kept on bullying me until I had to tell him what the convention really was.

"The épée is not used, because people *will* get hurt with it. Only the fleurette is allowed. That's just a foil with the button off. But don't choose it, Rob," I begged him, "if you can't fence. You'll make it so hard for him just to prick you."

"I'll make it hard for him all right. What about sabres, Adrian?"

"Do you want to spend some years in gaol?" I asked him. "Duelling is forbidden, Rob, just like drinking after midnight in England. If it isn't done decently, the police have to take action."

"But are sabres allowed by the rules of the game?" he demanded.

I explained that sabres were not for society affairs. They were only used by brutally angry military men—who could keep accidents fairly quiet and be punished by court martial rather than the criminal law.

"I don't give a damn," he said. "They started it, and they're going to get it. Sabres it is."

"But how good are you?"

"Better than anything else. I used to do quite a bit of single-stick as a boy. You teach me the proper salute, and then I'll wade in."

Wade in. Those were his words. I can hear them now. I was appalled at such bluntness in an affair which had to be handled with the utmost discretion. On the other hand if Rob

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could really use a sabre—singlestick meant nothing to me—the weapon for once might be safer than the fleurette.

"What language do we write out the challenge in?" he asked.

"French is customary in society."

"All right. You draft it, Adrian, and then I'll doll it up. My French is more formal than yours."

It was, blast the man! Rob's French was beautiful Second Empire stuff, and of course just right for the job. I tried to reassert myself and refused to deliver any challenge at all until I saw how competent he was with a sabre.

"That's my business. Any more nonsense from you, and I'll walk up to the captain and slap the face powder off his blue chin. Then he can choose machine guns if he likes, and God help him!"

I was overborne and silenced. The only concession I could get from him was that he would come to my flat and fence with me, just to put my mind at rest.

I drove round to call on the captain and performed the formalities. His company was on guard duty at the Royal Palace and the honour had gone to his head. So had the brandy which he and his chosen friend had been drinking, tapering off from the night before. I could see that both of them took Rob's choice of sabres as a bluff. They called it. Sabres would do.

Rob turned up at my flat the next morning. He was half angry, half pleased with himself.

The hotel porter had seen him to the door with a deeper bow than he had ever given. The driver of his carriage had attached a red, white, and blue ribbon to his whip. The Palace, the Military Club, the one fashionable hotel, and the two fashionable restaurants were all within a quarter of a mile of each other, but even so the speed at which rumour travelled was amazing.

I gave him the time and place—on a river sandbank about six miles out of town at half past twelve the following day. The more usual hour was before breakfast, but the captain and his second wanted to avoid it on the grounds that the police would then be watching their movements and would interfere before honour could be satisfied.

"I suppose the captain is quite happy about sabres?" Rob asked.

He sounded as if he felt he might be taking an unfair advantage, bless him! I put his mind at rest on that score. The captain was no master, but he had got through two rounds of the army championship.

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We put on masks and jackets and set to. Five minutes were enough to show me that nobody could possibly be less experienced than Rob. Somehow he had got German student-duelling into his head and thought that sabre fighting was all cut and slash. His bucolic singlestick gave him the guards for that stuff. But I tell you that he didn't even realise that the point of a sabre was meant for business.

"Your opponent can touch you wherever he likes," I said, "and that will be painful, but not vital if you don't throw yourself at him. What terrifies me is that if one of those swipes of yours ever did by accident connect you'd cut him clean in two."

"Look here, I don't want to go to gaol," Rob began.

It was going to be that or hospital, but I didn't say so.

"One of our foundry foremen was champion of Yorkshire at singlestick," he went on. "He told me that if you jump back and whack the ground, you can get in again while the other fellow is wondering what you are up to."

"He'd certainly wonder—especially meeting a lunatic for the first time."

The trick was better than nothing. There was just a chance that, with his reach and a twist of the wrist, he might get under the captain's sword arm with the point. I refused to let him try it on me, for I didn't want to spoil his confidence; but I made him practise the footwork and learn to lunge.

Out! Whack the ground! And in like lightning! The slightest scratch was enough for the seconds to call it a day.

But the longer he practised, the more I saw it could be suicide. I didn't tell him that. I put it the other way round: that he risked killing the captain. I begged him to say that His Majesty's Representative had absolutely forbidden the duel, or to get out of the country on some foolproof excuse and leave Marguliesh to attend to his business.

He wouldn't hear of it. I was up against British obstinacy and British determination to educate the foreigner. People who played about with idiotic, out-of-date conventions must be shown that they were asking for trouble.

I even promised that I would tell Magda the whole truth, and that she would be thankful he had shown some common sense. That was as near as I had ever come to admitting she was all ready for orange blossom and London. He blushed slightly and asked me what I *had* told her.

Well, I had let her believe it was to be the usual pistols, and she was still chuckling at the thought of her Rob trying to keep a solemn face while he went through the ridiculous ceremony of loosing off a shot into the sky.

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Rob at last left, still unfathomable. I suppose he was conditioned by his long war service to taking useless risks with a sort of sulky anger. As for me, I was as near hysteria as a young man brought up to decent self-control can get. There was no power on earth which could now stop this folly but the police. And to let the police know the time and place of the meeting was the act of a coward, a man without honour, a really unscrupulous, unsporting scoundrel. It was far worse than cheating at cards or bribing a jockey to pull a horse.

I considered all possible friends who could help with advice. Every one of them would assume that it was too late to do anything at all.

At last I thought of Marguliesh. As he had said to Rob, he was not—officially—a gentleman. He was safely seated in the stalls of this detestable comedy, and could see what the actor did not.

I drove round to the bank, and he had me shown into his office at once. He was very fond of Magda and Rob, and, I think, disapprovingly fond of me. He was horrified when he heard of sabres, and took all the blame on himself. Given Rob's character, he ought to have foreseen, he said, what might happen.

I felt the disgrace so strongly that I had not even formulated to myself what I wanted him to do: to tell the police. It was for Magda's sake. She was deeply in love with Rob, and he was the only man of first-class character likely to come her way who could keep her in reasonable comfort and didn't care whether she had money or not. If he was killed or sentenced to a long term for manslaughter—and he was so incompetent that either was likely—the only alternatives for Magda would be to marry some irresponsible Rumanian or to bat around Bucharest not caring what happened to her. And it was far more probable that she would do the latter.

All this Marguliesh understood without my having to say more than two words of it.

"Just tell me the time and place," he murmured, "and forget you ever did."

I pointed out agitatedly that the police were inclined to malicious gossip. If they let it slip that their information came from Marguliesh, everyone would guess that I had given it to him.

"I shouldn't worry about that," he said. "It is often of great importance that information should not be traced to me."

Of course. Brokers, the market, issues of stock—he could handle all that. But what about the police?

"A man such as I in a country like this," Marguliesh said

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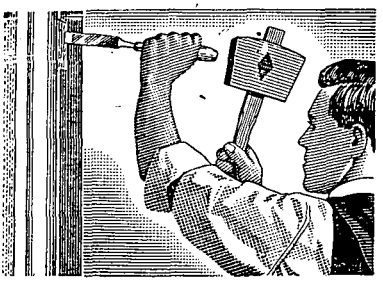

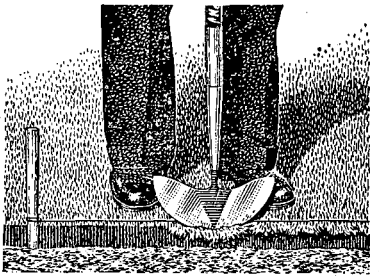

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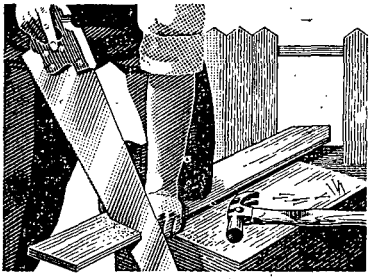

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slowly, in his melancholy way, " is unfortunately compelled to have his agents everywhere."

I told him the time and place of the meeting, horrified at what I was doing.

He smoked half a cigarette and asked me a question or two. Then he said, " There is a pleasant little tavern some two kilometres upriver from your sandbank. I think you know it? "

I didn't dare ask him why he thought so. It was a rendezvous which I had found useful for a very private and sentimental affair.

" Be there with Mr. Tymson a good hour before the meeting. Any conversation you have will be overheard and reported to police headquarters."

" But Rob and I will be speaking English," I protested.

" The person who will compose the report," said Mr. Margueliesh, " will not bother with too many details."

I called for Rob next morning at eleven. He was absolutely determined to appear normal. The only sign of nerves was in his language as he fumbled about the hotel bedroom looking for his matches. I told him that he wouldn't need any matches—which was hardly the best way of putting it—and then had to explain that I had brought some. I knew he would keep on lighting his pipe until his right hand was otherwise occupied.

It offended him to be looked after as if his thoughts were out of joint.

" Got the sabres? " he asked sharply.

" Yes—and a picnic basket with champagne for the party when it's all over."

" Don't the other fellows do anything? "

I said they didn't. As a matter of fact they were bringing the surgeon.

" What do we want to start so early for? "

" Just to get clear of the town in case the police suspect anything."

" Blast the police! " he exclaimed. " Slip twopence to the right man and he'll fix the police for you."

These businessmen seemed to think alike. But in an affair of this kind it was not so easy. Police procedure was to give a polite and formal warning to principals and seconds. If that failed—and it was supposed to fail—the police tried to turn up on the spot and stop the fight when it was about to take place. Then honour was satisfied—for the contestants had already shown their intention and there was nothing more to be proved by firing in the air or very cautiously poking at each other with the fleurette.

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If, however, the police were successfully avoided, the duel fought and damage done, the criminal law was enforced.

I drove Rob to the tavern where we sat under the willows along a backwater of the river and shared a bottle of champagne. There was a poor and respectable clerk entertaining his family in the garden and obviously above all suspicion—obviously, that is, unless one had a guilty conscience and wondered why he should choose such an hour on a working day for a family treat. He went into the back passage of the tavern where there was a telephone. I felt suddenly hopeful and—simultaneously—defiled.

We left at ten minutes past twelve. The track which ran along the river to the sandbank was full of pot-holes and cut by pebble drifts from the fast spring torrents. I doubted whether the car could take it, and allowed plenty of time in case we had to walk part of the way.

But the track gave us no trouble at all. We climbed the flood-bank. Below us were the hard sand, the blue swirl of the river, and another car. The military men, coming direct from Bucharest, had evidently doubted the state of their track just as I had, and arrived early at the rendezvous.

"For heaven's sake, tell me what I do!" Rob appealed. "Do I say good morning, or what?"

"You say a cheerful good morning to his second, and bow very distantly to him."

"And suppose he apologises?"

"Accept it quick! But he won't."

The two officers in their best uniforms were strolling up and down the yellow sand, talking to an unhygienic-looking gentleman with a black beard, and a black bag. Rob measured out his bows and was presented to the surgeon. He appeared a cool and formidable opponent. I suppose he was pretending to himself that there was a platoon behind him which had to be impressed.

It was only seventeen minutes past twelve. I went into a huddle with the other second, comparing weapons, complaining of the ground, doing anything to waste time. I could see what he was going to propose. But at last there came a moment when I could think of no more excuses.

And the police would time their arrival for a minute or two before twelve-thirty.

"Delay is so embarrassing for our principals, M. le Comte," he said. "So shall we . . .?"

Rob and his opponent took off their coats and rolled up their sleeves. The surgeon wiped down the sabres with a swab. The seconds passed them on. When Rob faced his man I could

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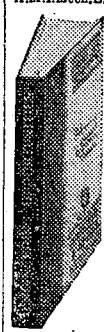

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perceive he was trying not to give him a nervous grin. I don't know what the captain thought. His face was set and pale. For all he knew, he might be up against a master. I expect he hoped he was. At least it would be a guarantee that he wouldn't be run through the liver by accident.

Rob performed his salute very well, considering he had learnt the finer points of it only the day before. The captain attacked instantly in a violent flèche which Rob by wild luck parried. He must have felt the experienced control of his opponent's wrist as the points slithered in tiny semicircles against each other, and realised there wasn't a moment to be lost. He jumped back half a step, tapped the ground smartly with his sabre, and lunged.

I closed my eyes, I think—a split second in which to imagine the captain dead, Rob racing for the frontier, and myself in the dock for aiding and abetting. The mess in reality was bad enough, before the law and from a housemaid's point of view.

Rob's hilt was within two feet of the captain, and the steel through him between shoulder and elbow. He was so appalled—the sensation of his sabre jarring on bone—that he hadn't yet noticed that his opponent's curved point had ripped up six good inches of his forearm.

He apologised instantly, just as if it had been an unavoidable foul in the course of some jolly game.

"But it is I who should apologise," replied the captain with a startled smile, and held out his hand.

We seconds, overcome by alarm and relief and the unconventional behaviour of our two gladiators, fluttered incompetently round them. The surgeon lost his head, and kept exclaiming that it was unprecedented and that the seconds must decide which of the two gentlemen should be attended first.

"Shove on a couple of field dressings, Adrian," Rob said, twisting a handkerchief round his arm above the elbow, "while he fixes the captain."

The captain grinned at Rob and gave a deep sigh which made the surgeon bustle to his professional duty. But to us the sigh was plainly one of relief. Almost anything might have happened. As it was, the pair of them had only to keep their arms in slings and their mouths shut. I was the only person who knew we were not yet out of trouble. When Mr. Marguliesh said that something would be done, done it was.

Naturally, I heard before any of them the noise of a car roaring along the track. I held up my hand. The captain's second made a dash for the flood-bank and put his head over the top. He signalled back frantically that it was the police.

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Rob didn't understand the danger. I was aghast at the results of my crime, and couldn't use my head at all. It was the captain who was inspired.

"Pretend nothing has happened!", he ordered.

I helped the pair of them on with their coats while they tried not to yell. The other second, back by now, wiped the sabres and laid them out ready for use. Then we hurled the surgeon's implements and bandages back into his black bag, and kicked sand over the clots of blood.

It was the colonel, second-in-command of the national police, who descended majestically from the flood-bank, followed by two lieutenants of gendarmerie. They were all gorgeously uniformed and medalled. A distinguished foreigner and a captain in a crack regiment, both rumoured to be so brave and angry that they insisted upon sabres, deserved the best costumes in the wardrobe for the third act.

"Gentlemen," said the colonel, in French as formal as Rob's, "I observe that I am fortunately in time to prevent a scandal."

It certainly looked as if he were. Rob and I stood arm in arm, with his hand dripping into his pocket and my thumb gently compressing the artery. By heaven's grace the captain's point had skated alongside without puncturing it. The captain and his second, also arm in arm, fiercely walked up and down their own territory of sand. The surgeon, in the centre, caressed his beard and appeared to be meditating upon the mysteries of his craft.

It was up to me. I played the exquisite young aristocrat, reluctantly handed over the sabres to the police, raised my hat, and made a little speech—after which I returned hastily to Rob in case blood should begin to show through his jacket.

The captain's second barked a few bluff words. The colonel of police saluted both parties in turn and gave a third speech, exhorting gallant men and allies to compose their differences.

Rob and the captain, unable to shake hands, pretended to be deeply moved and kissed each other. It was astonishing how quickly that man could adopt local customs when they suited him.

"Gentlemen, I shall not intrude upon you further," said the colonel, and prepared to make off with the confiscated sabres and his lieutenants.

"One moment, sir!" the captain's second very formally insisted. "I trust, Count Adrian, that you do not consider that we gave information to the police?"

"Sir, I am as certain of your honour as of my own," I replied gallantly.

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The colonel poured some hasty oil on that lot of waters.

"Let me assure you all that we acted upon a report received only an hour ago from an entirely independent source. You will understand that it is our duty, detestable though it may be, to make use of such agents as we can find."

The civil power swaggered away, and that was the end of it—except for some painful first aid and the welcome contents of my picnic basket. The affair was kept very quiet, but Rob thereafter was free of the country, the court, and the regimental messes as few foreigners ever had been.

Rumanians adore a jest so long as it ends well, and it soon got round that he had never handled a sabre in his life except to learn the salute.

Magda practically did not speak to me at all until I had to give her away in church. She said that my behaviour had been unforgivable.

So it was. But I never told even her why I thought so.

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★ ***Enthralling new short novel of India by Robert Blake appears complete in next month's Argosy on sale June 10***

★ ☆ ★

SOLUTIONS to GOLD AND SILVER

on page 26

1. *Twenty-five years. Another twenty-five!*
2. *Forty shillings.* 3. *Or and argent.*
4. *a. Plant; b. Bearer of gilt rod borne on State occasions; c. Field-officer of Life Guards on palace duty; d. Canada; e. Western Australia; f. U.S.A.*
5. *a. John Galsworthy; b. Henry James; c. Sean O'Casey.*
6. *True; they will be sold abroad for dollars.*
7. *Franz Lehar.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD

on page 144

Across. 1, *Barge-pole.* 6, *Spoil.* 9, *Angelus.* 10, *Traitor.* 11, *Satan.* 12, *Uncertain.* 13, *Apatite.* 14, *Reflect.* 16, *Tellers.* 19, *Surface.* 21, *Requisite.* 23, *Under.* 25, *Agitate.* 26, *Spanner.* 27, *Haste.* 28, *Sonneteer.*

Down. 1, *Brass.* 2, *Regatta.* 3, *Eglantine.* 4, *Obscure.* 5, *Enticer.* 6, *Stair.* 7, *Outdare.* 8, *Lorgnette.* 13, *Aftermath.* 15, *Fortunate.* 17, *Liquids.* 18, *Slivers.* 19, *Stepson.* 20, *Andante.* 22, *Irate.* 24, *Rarer.*

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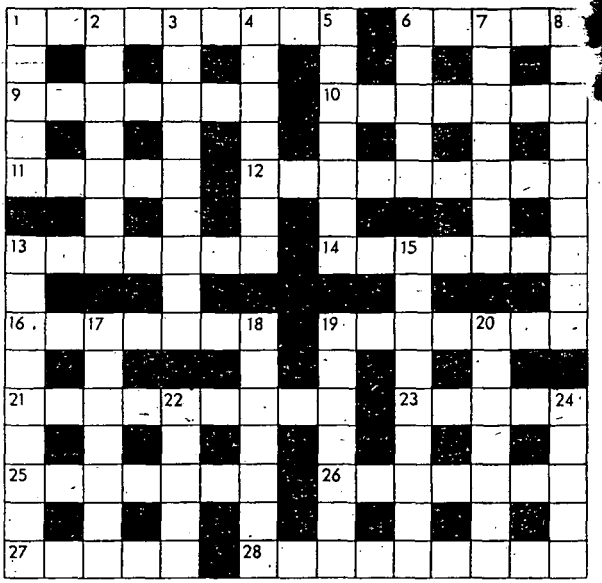
ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 143

★



CLUES

Across

1 Stick in the mud (5-4).

6 Plunder when stirrup pump strikes oil (5).

9 Knell of parting day (7).

10 You can love treason but hate him, Pepys said (7).

11 Locating mischief's his bent (5).

12 K. Amis had that feeling (9).

13 Mineral, not racial hunger (7).

14 Think, and throw back (7).

16 Manipulators of beads or bullion (7).

19 Superficial swimming pro? (7).

21 Is it queer, mixed-up? No, needful (9).

23 This study's only fit for standing in (5).

25 Upset, little Agnes swallowed it (7).

26 Trouble in the works? (7).

27 For speed, has tea with missing article (5).

28 Old English tenners for small-scale poet (9).

Down

1 Yorkshireman's cash (5).

2 Is great at mad boat show (7).

3 Sweet brier but can't be smoked (9).

4 Something doubtful in Bob's cure (7).

5 Beguiler (7).

6 Lack of this rod won't 6 a child (5).

7 Be braver even than Dan? (7).

8 On letter G quizzing-glass unfocused (9).

13 Outcome follows Yank algebra (9).

15 Lucky—fish *not* in piano! (9).

17 Fifty-one quids in—fluid assets? (7).

18 Shavings are offal in SS (7).

19 March, boy, Mum's remarried (7).

20 Italian poet in slow motion (7).

22 Me and my tax? Pretty cross! (5).

24 More uncommon (5).

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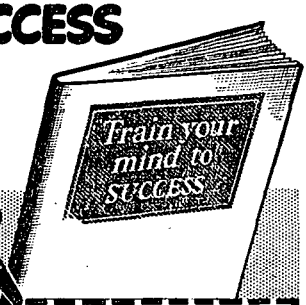

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